Universidade de Aveiro Departamento de Línguas e Culturas
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PAULA EDUARDA FERNANDES LOUREIRO

CONFLITO NA BASE DA CONSTRUÇÃO DE IDENTIDADE – ROMANCES DE FORMAÇÃO

CONFLICT AT THE BASIS OF IDENTITY BUILDING – NOVELS OF TRANSFORMATION

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Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas, realizada sob a orientação científica do Professor Doutor Kenneth David Callahan, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro.

O júri

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Palavras-chave *Bildungsroman*, Pós-colonial, Black British, Conflito, Construção de Identidade

Resumo

O presente trabalho incide numa abordagem transversal de diferentes obras literárias da ficção contemporânea, partindo de processos de colonização e descolonização díspares. Pretende-se sublinhar as consequências do fenómeno (inter)nacional ao nível da identidade pessoal de indivíduos oriundos de ex-colónias, centrando a atenção na figura do escritor apátrida, desenraizado cultural e socialmente, e no tratamento literário dado a esta experiência. A abordagem é conduzida a partir da noção de *Bildungsroman*, no contexto da literatura pós-colonial. Cada obra contribui com uma perspetiva diferente para o tema, partindo de uma análise multifacetada do indivíduo nascido numa colónia que entretanto se torna um país independente, partindo para uma análise das relações resultantes do afastamento involuntário do indivíduo das suas raízes, no decurso de um processo que integra relações contraditórias com o conceito de pátria, na busca de uma identidade. Foram selecionadas obras de autores de diferentes origens, todos escritores em língua inglesa.

Keywords *Bildungsroman*, Postcolonial, Black British, Conflict, Identity Building

Abstract

This thesis focuses on an analysis of literary examples of modern fiction, starting from different processes of colonization and decolonization. The objective is to underline the consequences of the (inter)national phenomenon seen from the personal identity of individuals coming from former colonies, focusing attention on the homeless writer, culturally and socially uprooted, and on the literary treatment of this experience. The analysis follows the notions of the *Bildungsroman* in the context of postcolonial literature. Each novel contributes with a different perspective, beginning with a multi-layered analysis of the individual born in a colony which has become an independent country, moving on to an analysis of the relationships resulting from the involuntary distance of the individual of his roots, in a process which comprises contradictory relationships with the concept of motherland, in the search of identity. Novels of writers from different origins were chosen, all writing in English.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea
I had a sound colonial education
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.
The Schooner Boy, Derek Walcott

It is the aim of this thesis to analyze major postcolonial issues of identification, belonging and homelessness, by comparing, four novels written by postcolonial writers within the context of British colonialism: Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, and V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds.* The *leitmotiv* chosen to highlight both similarities and differences within the novels is that of the common features of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, adapted to the new context and historical era of postcolonial critique. The chronological approach to the novels accompanies the different stages undergone by the migrant communities entering the centre of the former British Empire, coming from distant points where Britishness has spread and changed the world. The most prominent characteristics of these coming-of-age fictional narratives within the topic of identity construction are the original sense of displacement that the protagonist experiences, the different kinds of conflict which derive from that displacement, and the journey(s) undertaken by the protagonists, simultaneously literal and metaphorical.

The protagonists of the first four novels are products of the British Empire, although in different ways, and they all share a common aim, namely the quest for identity, which in their case is intimately linked to the notion of conflict – within the context of both the place where they come from (their family, education and childhood, religious background, cultural ties to the motherland) and the place where they arrive (hostility, discrimination, lack of perspectives). This notion of

conflict pervades the novels and it is through compromise that the protagonists achieve some sort of self-assertion.

Conflict is necessary to shake old structures and make way for new types of relationships, based on new principles, thus generating a new order. The literature of diaspora deals with postcolonial issues related both to the former colonies and to the former Western colonizers: the interaction of peoples and cultures during colonialism has changed both sides; so has the transition to post-colonial discourse, worldwide. The novels analyzed in this project stage personal dramas and conflicts that illustrate the dramas and conflicts of diasporic groups. The journeys made by the protagonists follow the same map drawn by contemporary societies in their search for their identities.

Postcolonial discourse, in general as in literature, focuses on the processes of identity fragmentation and identity recovery. Travelling often seems to be the beginning of the journey leading to identity re-formation. The authors mentioned in this project have all come a long way – physically, from their native lands to London, the symbol of empire and the cosmopolitan city of the postcolonial world order; but they have also embarked on an inner journey of self-discovery, and through their writing, have tried in different ways to find their place, to merge their personal narratives with the narratives of their characters.

The authors discussed in this project write from the same perspective - they are migrants, living in a place where they were not born, and carrying strong cultural ties to their ancestors' homeland, which is not theirs, although not from the same point of view. Kureishi declares himself to be a Londoner, thus evading issues of national belonging and cultural ancestry. Naipaul does not see himself as Trinidadian or Indian, but he does not feel English either. Some critics say in fact he is still looking for a definition of where he stands regarding national identity. Selvon lived most of his adult life in London, but he always expressed himself as Caribbean. They were born in former colonies of the British Empire, which they left in order to move to England, specifically London, the heart of the former empire and the centre of the new postcolonial order in the English-speaking world. They have developed an ambiguous connection to their motherlands and their cultural inheritances, by refusing to be their representatives, while at the same time

asserting their background through the literature they produce. They have chosen to live the experience of exile, as one of not-belonging; through their work (as well as their participation in cultural life, mainly through interviews) they introduce themselves as “citizens of the world”.

In their novels, they address the issue of colonialism and its aftermath, by creating characters who are displaced and disoriented, who embark on (geographical and personal) journeys in quest of some sense of identity and in search of a place where they can feel they belong. They are trapped in a moment in time when, using Antonio Gramsci’s expression, “the old is dying, and the new cannot be born”. The colonial world has disappeared, but the contours of the new postcolonial world are still blurred. They are living in an interregnum between different social, political and cultural orders, but also between identities – their personal quest, caused by a conflict with paternal authority, functions as a metaphor for the wider quest of postcolonial societies, attempting to assert authority and leadership, and (re)creating their autonomy.

These novels belong to a subgenre often called “novels of transformation”, as mentioned in Mark Stein’s book title (*Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*) and they address the personal transformation of the characters as well as the social and cultural changes of the world they inhabit. This transformation refers both to the growing maturity of the protagonists (achieved through changes in personality and the way they see the world, as a result of a development process) and the changes which occur in the places they inhabit, mainly in British society as consequence of the end of empire and the mingling with migrants from the former colonies, which has given rise to new social and cultural patterns. These novels of transformation, following the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, deal with the protagonists’ adventure away from home on a journey which will hopefully provide them a sense of identity based on which they can situate themselves and relate to others within a context of relations of mutual dependence, moving away from the perpetuation of survival rituals and mundane getting-by and thus attaining a more meaningful life.

Identity is a broad concept which covers notions as varied as individuality, group, place and time, and since these are permanently changing, identity must be

faced not as a closed defined concept, but rather as a process: “Cultural identity (…) is a matter of *becoming* as well as of *being*” (Hall 1990, 225). The nature of human identity is linked to the multiplicity of roles we accumulate over the course of our lives, and which awaken different responses and attitudes in us. Combining these differences into a coherent unity is a persistent challenge. Our identity is built upon different factors (such as personality traits, family background and relationships, the social and geographic environment) and derives from multiple sources (such as nationality, ethnicity, gender), “sources which may conflict in the construction of identity positions and lead to contradictory fragmented identities” (Woodward 1). In the context of postcolonial societies, this fragmentation is amplified by the absence of a historical continuum, in the sense that the intervention of European colonizers has interrupted and altered what could have been the “natural” course of development. “Modern cultures, like modern identities, are fragmented. Cultural identities are defined through narratives that occasionally overlap and conflict” (Entrikin 56). In this framework, the concept of place and its relevance in the construction of a sense of identification exert more impact, along with the concept of time flow.

In order to make sense of our individuality, composed of so many vectors, and because we are not alone, it is necessary to consider those around us, with whom we interact and establish relationships – both by establishing similarities and differences: “The question of identity is posed always in relation to the other” (Augé 1999, 10). It is through comparison that we gain perception of ourselves, better realize personal characteristics, often by grasping what we are not, and this has become especially true in today’s cosmopolitan world, where we easily make contact with people who are different in so many ways – because they speak different languages, eat different food, follow different religions, or come from places with different experiences and thus see things with different perspectives. Still following Marc Augé’s line of thought, “all ritual activity has the goal of producing identity through the recognition of alterities” (1999, 11). Socializing through shared routine rituals (from religious acts to watching a sports event as a supporter) makes this alterity more visible and closer, easier to identify, and thus less frightening.

The process of constructing identity must consider the subject and other subjects as well as their context: “We live in a world where identity matters. (…) Principally, identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed” (Gilroy 1997, 301). The world and the people around us reflect our deeds thus giving us back some kind of awareness of our actions while at the same time partly determining what we choose to do and what we can do, through restrictions that we either accept and comply with, or reject: “external circumstances alone do not determine who we are; it is how we negotiate these circumstances that gives us the answer to the question “Who am I?”” (Paranjabe 231). Because we are social beings, “the ethical task each of us has – our life making – is inevitably bound up with the ethical lives of others” (Appiah 2005, xvii). Self conscious individuality requires establishing bonds with other individuals and groups, from which we take the knowledge and experience to exert our freedom of choice and develop our personality. There is a kind of permanent conflict between our tendency to think of ourselves and the inevitability of considering others, and their effect on us. “As a result, individuality presupposes sociability, not just a grudging respect for the individuality of others. A free self is a human self, and we are … social beings.” (Appiah 2005, 20). Each individual’s life project implies individual choices, but they are constrained by the choices made by others in the course of their life project. And we are inevitably influenced in our choices by the interaction with others. We are not isolated in the process of identity formation and we must consider our social environment and those we have contact with; similarities and differences are constantly arising, through partnership and confrontation, or simple contact. The awareness of others contributes to our sense of self, often by opposition: “that structure of identification is always constructed through ambivalence. Always constructed through splitting. Splitting between that which one is, and that which is the other” (Hall 1991, 47-48).

As social beings, we play multiple roles and grow multifaceted identities, according to contexts and situations; and our life story develops within the context of a wider social network, and that will, hopefully, provide us with a sense of belonging: “ethnic and national identities fit a personal narrative into a larger

narrative" (Appiah 2005, 23). Our personal narrative may include multiple dimensions, but it must be coherent to those around us who read themselves into the same identitarian narrative, and in order to gain meaning it must find its place into a communal project of humanity. Paul Gilbert uses the notion of "narrative identity" to refer to this communicative trait of human identity, both in the sense of establishing meaningful communication and interaction with others, through the use of different types of language, and in the sense of building a coherent line of events through time: "The story we tell about ourselves has to cohere, more or less, with the stories other people tell, and each person's story will involve others as characters in it (…) an individual's narrative identity depends upon her being *embedded*, in some sense, in a culture of narratives" (Gilbert 47). Our life story necessarily includes other characters (people, places, events), each with their own personal narrative. The "larger narrative" therefore provides a sense of belonging, gives social and historical meaning to each narrative and allows a more comprehensive perspective with a greater objectivity than that we can achieve alone because we are focused on our personal story.

One possible way of meeting this need to intertwine our life story with the stories of others, in order to build a sense of identity, inherently provisory because of its ever-changing historical and social grounds, is by reconceptualising identity as an issue of identification, according to Hall: "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not (…) that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its identity – can be constructed" (Hall 1996, 4).

Cultural identity can be thought of as a collective concept, uniting people with a common history and ancestry: "Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (Hall 1990, 223). History and ancestry constitute the background scenery for individual identification, focusing on what people have in

common which allows them to identify with certain groups (focus here is on the aspect of *being*). Cultural identity can also be understood as a process (*being* and *becoming*), which implicates the assertion of both similarities and differences established within the course of time and history: "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (Hall 1990, 225). Accepting identity as a process, implicating the present, the past and the future ("identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past", (Hall 1990, 225), we can better understand the colonial experience as one of inflicting onto colonized peoples a perspective of themselves as "the Other", from the Western controlling perspective. The multidimensional supremacy of the European colonizers forced a certain kind of normalization among colonized peoples; since they were seen as "the others", they were considered only in their visible similarities (such as darker skin, lack of technologically advanced instruments, or different religious behavior): "Vis-à-vis the developed West, we [the Caribbean peoples] are very much *the same*. We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the *Other*" (Hall 1990, 228). In the context of postcolonial cultural identity, the impact of Otherness fell wholly upon the colonized peoples, who became in the eyes of the European powers "the others", the ones who were different, and through centuries of economic, military and cultural domination, also came to internalize this otherness. In the aftermath of colonialism, in an effort to come to terms with this *estrangement*, "some previously marginalized ethnic groups have resisted their marginalization within the "host" societies by reasserting vigorously their identities of origin" (Woodward, 17). The discourse of "us" and "them" has thus been kept, and these origins are often exacerbated in the search of a lost group feeling that may bring some self-assertion in a hostile environment; this aspect is evident in the novels of Selvon and Kureishi analyzed here.

The question of representation is centrally relevant when discussing issues of identity in postcolonial literature: "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than

being: not *who we are* or *where we came from*, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall 1996, 4). Historically, the sense of Otherness imposed upon colonized peoples has produced a (mis)representation which has caused a sense of distance, even towards one's own place of origin; personally, this representation witnessed by migrants and their descendants in daily life inevitably leads to the tacit acceptance of a degree of otherness, which is patent in the current speech of "us" and "them".

Relativity seems to be one the most prominent characteristics of cultural identity: "Whether individual or collective, identity is in all cases relative. It is always constructed through negotiation with an otherness that is itself relative, and it is this negotiation that becomes the object of ritual activity" (Augé 1998, xiii/xiv). Contact with what constitutes "the Other" helps clarify one's own sense of otherness, through comparison and questioning of differences; this originates the awareness that "there is no "pure" belonging, no "pure" diaspora. What we must contend with instead are types of belonging and uprooting, affirmation and denials of identity, sameness and difference" (Paranjape, 231). It is our personal choices that determine the degree of affirmation and negation, as well as our acceptance of dualities in the process of self-determination. When Kwame A. Appiah refers to the two dimensions of the individual identity, the personal dimension and the collective, that is, the intersection of collective identities that we combine, he stresses the normative role of these collective identities, they "provide what we may call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling these life stories" (Appiah 1994, 160). These models impose certain norms of action, while providing guidelines, thus allowing group interaction, and interaction among different groups. The constant challenge is to balance our individuality with the collective identities we assimilate through contact and bonds with different groups, which is where choice and self-determination are crucial.

The momentary character of identity is also linked to its dependence on the relation to others: "Identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences. Thus the emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity and on

the connections or articulations between the fragments or differences" (Grossberg 89). The postcolonial subject, whether a former colonizer or a former member of the colonized, or the descendents of colonialism, cannot aspire to the establishment of one fixed identity. In the present world, the disruption of the ancient sense of place (through historical changes and technological transformations mainly in the transport and communication areas) has forced a new decentered world view, in which "here" and "now" are transient notions, and people are still in the process of grasping their position in this new world, feeling somehow alienated: "the cognitive gap continues to grow between the geography of the global village and the cultural guides available for interpreting this world. This gap is reflected in the inability of individual subjects to situate themselves in the world" (Entrikin, 44). This sense of disorientation is linked to the fact that individual life projects lose stable meaning and relevance in a world where everything changes, there are few anchors, and this is even more visible in the postcolonial context, where the world as we knew it disappeared and the contours of the new order are still too blurred. Once again, this disorientation is very clearly present in the novels analyzed in this work.

The mingling of peoples and cultures in Britain which started in the 1950s when waves of migrants from British colonies were given British citizenship and officially welcomed as a necessary addition to the workforce has produced a two-fold process of cultural influence, which is now acknowledged as simultaneously enriching and disorienting: "Part of the uniqueness of individuals results from the ways in which they integrate, reflect upon, and modify their own cultural heritage and that of other people with whom they come into contact" (Gutmann 7). Being permeable to influences from the people and the environment surrounding us, as opposed to fighting it and staying isolated, is thus a means of survival, since adaptability is essential when it is no longer possible to maintain the "purity" of pre-colonial times. This dialogically created identity makes clear the connection between identity and recognition, since, in Charles Taylor's well-known approach, "we become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression (…) we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with

others" (Taylor 1994, 32). Individuals need contact with other individuals and groups from whom they can learn ways of expressing themselves, with whom they can exchange experiences, developing language(s) necessary to convey a sense of identity. They are what George Herbert Mead in his theories about the development of self called "the significant others", and their recognition of our individuality gives it meaning and sustainability. This dialogical character of human identity leads to the creation of expectations, which are especially visible with respect to minorities, so definition of identity develops both in dialogue with, and in a struggle against the image that "the significant others" build of us. "Individuals are what they are only because they are *embedded* in cultures" (Gilbert 9). This communal experience and learning is essential: one learns about oneself and others, and through communication one perceives how others see us, which allows self-awareness and constitutes some kind of endorsement of our actions.

The recognition of individuality has lead to what Charles Taylor names "the politics of difference": "what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else" (Taylor 1994, 38). This implies acceptance of specificities and personal choices that may not match the expectations created, and defies the acceptance of stereotypes and generalizing labels. In the following chapter therefore emphasis is given to the ways in which different writers, born in former British colonies and writing in English, have dealt with these topics in their fictional work. As will be seen, their protagonists try to find a sense of self by distancing themselves from their origins and trying to come to terms with who they are in a place / places where most people are different.

CHAPTER TWO: BLACK BRITISH LITERATURE

Within the widespread universe of postcolonial literature and theory, the loose concept of Black British literature is used to refer mostly to fictional literature written in English by authors who are classified as not white and who were born in (former) British colonies or whose ancestors were. This set of texts may vary in genre, although most are novels, and themes, but they all share the colonial and postcolonial historical background, and the stories they tell are of individuals who are trying to come to terms with the changes brought about by the end of the empire, which have had significant and multiple effects both on the groups and on individuals. “Black British literature (…) not only deals with the situation of those who came from former colonies and their descendants, but also with the society which they discovered and continue to shape – and with those societies left behind” (Stein 2004, xii). The novels analyzed in this thesis form a kind of a map, and together they interweave a pattern where it is possible to observe effects of colonialism and what followed it at different levels of identity: in the new societies which have developed after independence, in the former metropolis adapting to its new status, and in the private sphere of people’s lives.

The protagonists share a deep sense of displacement, geographic, cultural and social, which is a consequence of living “in-between” spaces: “Neither colonizer nor precolonial subject, the postcolonial subject exists as a unique hybrid” (Grossberg 91). This notion of hybridity is common to many theorists of postcolonialism and basically refers to a subject occupying what is called a “third space”, which is neither the one of the dominant imperial culture nor the space of the colonized, deemed to be placed at the other end of the spectrum. “The postcolonial diaspora is not simply immigration into Britain from other places (…) but is instead a continual reminder that “we are here because you were there” (Williams n/p). This traditional dichotomy is losing strength as time goes by and the postcolonial world acquires new nuances, new inhabitants. The we/they,

here/there dichotomist discourse no longer applies to the new world order. The emerging hybridity requires a new language, able to express those nuances, and in many Black British novels "narrative patterns of in-betweenness and hybridity as well as guilt relating to the after-effects of colonialism feature prominently" (Yekani 14). A relatively common trait of this type of novel is the rise of questions of assimilation and resistance – regarding the family culture and the European / British culture. The protagonists struggle against keeping the family ties to a past which is not theirs, that they have not lived, and against committing to a new cultural heritance which is not theirs, since most of the time everything around them tells them that they just happen to live there, not really having bonds to European cultures – and in this struggle skin colour is a recurrent destabilizing factor. According to Bronwyn T. Williams, it is necessary "to hybridize the discourse, to reconfigure the concept of all cultural identities as fluid and heterogenous" (n/p), in order to accommodate this new hybrid being.

It is possible to witness in novels written by Black British writers a gradual expansion of that sense of displacement: "Displacement in these narratives is experienced at many levels. Simultaneously: of place, of cultural space, of temporalities, of ways of being, of imaginaries, of inner space, so that one could say that the diasporic condition is in a sense *the* defining experiential reality of contemporary times" (Venn 12). The characters gradually become aware that returning "home" is no longer an option. Historically, the places of origin no longer exist as such, and the new countries undergo significant political, social and cultural changes that make it impossible to be completely recognized by those who have lost contact with those realities. This generation is distinct from the first-generation migrants, whose status was and remained that of the outsider, who concentrated on survival techniques and found strength in the dream of one day returning home. Second-generation migrants are distant from their origin and displaced in England, they occupy "transnational transcultural spaces that are defined by *imagined worlds*" (Williams n/p), an expression which, as many others, has been created to answer the necessity to come up with new concepts that can replace former dichotomies, such as metropolis / colony, colonizer / colonized. As Mark Stein points out, talking about Black British novels of transformation, these

texts are not only about the identity building of the protagonist, but also about the development of the societies where they live: “The settlement of new social, political, and creative spaces that are distinct from both the points of departure and of destination, the settlement of a third space” (Stein 2004, 20) – a space which is so much more than a physical location, where it is possible for people to establish a network of social and cultural relations which can make them feel “at home”.

Feeling at home, that is, acquiring a sense of belonging, is the main pursuit of the protagonists of these novels of transformation, in their quest for identification, and the absence of this sense of belonging deeply interferes with the process of identity building: “The process of forming a stable identity is undertaken in relationship to the sense of belonging to a literal or metaphorical *home*, or the lack of such belonging” (Alghamdi 45). This is not a characteristic exclusively of people from the colonies, but also an experience lived by those sent to the colonies representing the Empire: “The colonial is separated from where one lives by virtue of one’s origins and from one’s origins by virtue of where one lives” (Lawson 49). Both colonizers and colonized embarking on long-lasting journeys between metropolis and colonies have lost their cultural anchors and struggle to redefine themselves. There is a common feature in many transformation novels, which is that “the personal neurosis of incompleteness, the need to be identified with a fuller centre of meaning is a mirror of some larger dis-ease in the colonial culture” (Lawson 57). The way the colonial enterprise was carried has led to severe fissures crossing political, social, cultural and temporal boundaries. Homes have been destroyed, homes have disappeared, homes have been transformed. Modern societies reflect a “representation of the present as a place marked by a trail of survivors searching for their roots, for a home, in the ruins of history” (Walder 2). These survivors experience the desolation of homelessness and turn to a nostalgic reconstruction which has been called the “twilight zone” by historian E. J. Hobsbawm, referring to a grey area somewhere between memory and history, where the generic past and one’s personal past cross.

When the physical home is out of reach or does not exist anymore, the displaced subject dwells with the notion until it becomes an imagined construct, an abstract concept created somewhere between memory and what we may call

nostalgia. According to John J. Su, “nostalgic homelands frequently exist only in the imagination” (Su 1), and postcolonial novel protagonists are often defined by their longing to return to a lost homeland, as a way of dealing with loss and displacement. Contemporary authors connected to Britain’s colonial history, like V. S. Naipaul and Hanif Kureishi, deal with nostalgia in different ways, but they often “exploit nostalgia’s tendency to interweave imagination, longing, and memory in their efforts to envision resolutions to the social dilemmas of fragmentation and displacement described in their novels” (Su 3). This exercise allows an analysis of how social relations which have come out of the colonial era are not suitable to fulfill present needs; the imaginary homelands that result from this analysis are thus valuable efforts to exploit possible alternatives for modern societies. On the other hand, imaginary homelands may emphasize the “alienation of a subject from his or her immediate surroundings and culture” (Alghamdi 5), since they reinforce a nostalgia for something which is inaccessible, thus sentencing the postcolonial subject to an endless search.

Among the fictional literature that has been given the label postcolonial, many novels written by Black British authors fall under the designation of novels of transformation. As Mark Stein states in a book with this subtitle, “The Black British novel of transformation (…) is about the formation of its protagonists as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions” (Stein 2004, 22). The novel of transformation thus highlights the dialogical character of social relations within the once host culture of the empire, showing that those who are still included in the minority label have been changed by the dominant culture, but have also produced changes in that society. The transformation that protagonists undergo throughout their ordeal is set against the background of a society which is itself in a process of change – in the novels dealt with in this work, it is possible to witness how both the former metropolis and the former colonies (in Africa and India) are regaining contours after the experience of colonialism, and new societies are coming to life, which bear the marks of that experience and seek to come to terms with the new social tissue resulting from that historical era. The world is changing, and the protagonists must change with it, in a personal quest

which is a symbol of many similar quests pursued throughout the new geographic lines. The *Bildungsroman*, or rather this renewed form, introduces the reader to protagonists "on the threshold between different historical eras" (Boes 236), both human beings and the world in the process of "becoming".

Today's Black British novel of transformation is a modern adaptation of the *Bildungsroman*, rooted in the Western bourgeois tradition, in what might seem an unlikely construct, since the origins of the *Bildungsroman* actually exclude it: "In its most early inception, the *Bildungsroman* told a story that was white, male, heterosexual, and middle class" (Hoagland 4). This ideological charge has remained associated to the genre, and authors writing outside this paradigm must be aware of the expectations the reader projects on these texts. As Hoagland points out, "the audience implications of the *Bildungsroman* pose a significant challenge to texts which borrow from that tradition while at the same time reconfigure it" (Hoagland 5), and these novels shake a sort of pre-established order, while they simultaneously function as a revolutionary instrument, through appropriation of a genre that represents Western cultural roots and its adaptation to a context of minorities, kept outside the cultural canon. Throughout the past decades, the wide use of this structure has redefined its concept, and "the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models" (Boes 231), linked to minority areas such as feminist and post-colonial studies.

Among the common basic topics which constitute the distinguishing features of the genre, one can find a growing sense of isolation (usually connected to some kind of exclusion from the dominant culture or group, or coming from conflicts between the individual's interests / needs and the family or community's expectations) which culminates in the decision (voluntary or imposed) to leave, to start a journey into the unknown which will provide the protagonist encounters with different types of characters and cultural environments, thus increasing his or her worldliness; from these experiences subjects learn about themselves and the world around them. While travelling (literally or metaphorically), the "hero" of the novel faces a range of adversities, and alongside the opposing elements, there are always some characters who fulfill the function of helping the hero overcome a

range of ordeals. There are moments throughout this journey of self-discovery when protagonists are confronted with processes of decision-making and choice, which prove decisive for the unfolding of the story, and provide the reader with some insight into the characters, but also into the society in which they are inserted – "and, as the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* is frequently a part of the resistance literature tradition, the texts should engage in a critique of social norms and expectations that shape the sense of self" (Hoagland 10). These unstated rules are in this case linked to conceptions of how non-natives should act, what they should aspire to, and how far they can go into merging with the mainstream social tissue.

The decision of leaving mentioned above is often not a choice at all, since "the protagonist is "always already" separate from the dominant society, beginning at birth, and the separation typically lasts the protagonist's entire life" (Hoagland 31). This divide is most visible in skin colour, but includes distinct cultural background concepts, from language to religion. In the case of protagonists who were born within the dominant Western culture, there is the additional clash between their parents' influences and the "white culture", which they want to claim as theirs, but which is never acknowledged as such, leaving them cut off from any solid cultural bonds. The choices presented imply a kind of compromise between the protagonist and their native culture, but also between them and the society they now inhabit - "The choices the postcolonial protagonist makes resonate with the pain of the past and the problems of the present, and extend beyond the individual self" (Hoagland 36). The option of having a choice at all is sometimes questioned and this is a feature of modern postcolonial societies trying to overcome the mystification left behind by the historical truths and discourses of colonialism.

"Memory, or Mnemosyne as the Greeks called her, was the mother of all the Muses, and invention or imagination depends utterly upon remembering" (Walder 6). It is through memory, exercised together with creativity, that human beings consciously or unconsciously build a thread of meaning in which we situate ourselves in both space and time, creating a narrative that is simultaneously

personal and communal, and which may eventually enable us to grasp who and what we are now, based on our background history and stories. When people move away from their homeland, the geographic and the gradual emotional distance cause this life narrative to have less and less memory, and more and more imagination – required to fill in gaps regarding what one cannot remember, but also to incorporate new experiences into a relatively coherent wholeness.

The arrival of thousands of immigrants in London from the British colonies in the post-war period, which started with a group of almost five hundred Caribbean immigrants on the *SS Windrush* in 1948 and went on in successive waves, gradually turned the metropolis into a mixed, transnational centre, in a process which is often referred to as the reinvasion of the centre, and named by the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett (in her poem *Colonization in Reverse*, from 1966) "colonizing in reverse". Many postcolonial fictional narratives are set in London, the symbol of "the world that was" and of "the world that has become", and the characters "appropriate and imaginatively reinvent the city as a function of their individual and communal experiences of arriving, dwelling, walking, working, interacting, observing, responding, and describing" (Ball 10). This reinvention of the city is a necessary process for survival in a new and hostile milieu, where the native population still looks down on the Other. However, the newly arrived population is strongly conditioned by images of home: "The metropolitan city becomes textually reinscribed through an Indian or Canadian sensibility; it becomes newly interlinked with Trinidadian or Nigerian spaces and lived realities to which, as imperial capital, it has long been related, but at an oceanic distance" (Ball 10). The result is a reinvented city with the flavours of the colonies, incorporating the empire into the metropolis.

These new Londoners which populate literary black British narratives establish physical and imaginary ways of appropriation of the city, which is the promise of a world long dreamed of, still at home: "many travel to a London they have idealized at a distance as a place of light, knowledge, empowerment, opportunity, pleasure, and access to "the world" (or to the "real world" they have come to believe does not exist at home)" (Ball 21). This is a result of colonial education, which spread throughout the colonies a glamorous image which was

taken literally, so that London (as a symbol of the metropolis) came to represent the centre of the world, a western world which was out of reach in the circumscribed and ostracized limits of the colonies. At the same time, the real London is basically a hostile environment, where these newcomers experience discrimination at various levels, where they stand out because of their skin colour and speech and ethnic specificities, where "blackness" is a feature distinct from "Britishness": "Several postcolonial writers bear witness to the racism, violence and torment they and others experienced (…) and offer a bleak, somber view of the city that demythologizes the colonial myth of London as the heart of a welcoming site of opportunity and fulfillment for those arriving from the colonies" (McLeod 27).

The London experience becomes for the colonial immigrant "heuristic, aesthetic and emotional" (Guignery 17), where one senses "the modern city in motion but at the same time (…) feel the weight and persistence of the past" (Guignery 17). This characteristic of combining a heavy past and an unclear present is pointed out by John Clement Ball: "Some physical spaces in London – the Thames, Big Ben – are constant reminders that it is both a local and a global site and that the time with which it is encoded is both present and past time" (Ball 15). Identity is a concept which applies to individuals, groups and places, and in postcolonial novels the city is recreated by those newcomers, who filter it through their colonial experiences: "Those residents are physically detached but psychologically and culturally attached to non-English places and national identities, through which their experiences and portrayals of London are constantly processed" (Ball 31). This clinging to homeland provided comforting images in the new environment, where these people were identified as "strangers" and, despite the British passport, were denied the status of Londoners. The characters of the novels repeatedly experience a disorientating feeling of misplacement, not knowing how to behave or what to say in situations of interaction in the city, which makes them feel more sternly their condition of foreigners / strangers, and reinforces the communal bonds among themselves, not just to help each other, but also in search of acceptance. The creation of neighbourhoods according to the origin of their inhabitants, where people cook their traditional food and speak with

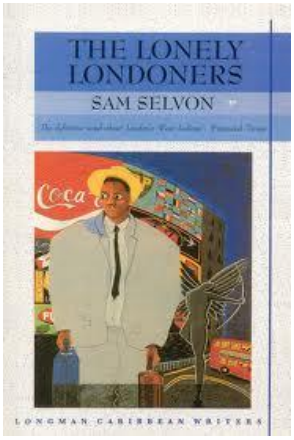
their dialects also contributed to the reshaping of the city, which gained new colours, scents and flavours, and even today these districts are associated with the origin of the first groups of immigrants: Brixton with Jamaican, Trinidadian and Guyanese groups, Southall with Indian and Pakistani communities, for example. These were places of seclusion, where people remain largely separated from the rest of the population and immersed in their communities, but this isolation can also work as protection, allowing a sense of "one's own place".

The gradual settlement, a growing knowledge of the city and its ways, and the birth of second- and third-generations contributed to a broadening of the spectre regarding immigrant communities and their relation to the city, and postcolonial novelists present London as both place and space: "bearing witness to forms of urban authority which attempt to secure London's newcomers in a certain mapping of the city, but also prizing the agency of those whose determined attempts to open new spaces in London expose the city's plasticity and deliver it up to the democratizing possibilities of spatial creolization" (McLeod 27). Long-term contact and occupation of the city produces a growing sense of Britishness, not only on the streets but also at home. As Mica Nava mentions, these "domestic cultures" which have sprung up in London's neighbourhoods express a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism, "in that they signal the increasingly undifferentiated, hybrid, post-multicultural, lived transformations which are the outcome of diasporic cultural mixing and indeterminacy rather than plurality and coexistence" (Nava 13). This lack of determinacy is visible for example in the growing resistance of new generations in perpetuating behaviours of self-exclusion formerly imposed by their communities, while still feeling a group set apart, labelled under ethnic designations. This in-betweeness is a fact they have acknowledged and learnt to incorporate in their lives. "These are young people who have grown up routinely mixing *Eastern* and *Western* markers of identity, through language, bodily expression, music, and consumer habits, who are not confused about their identities and values as cultural *hybrids*" (Amin 68). Carrying markers of both cultures and origins, being simultaneously Black and British, these new generations claim their own space and their own voice within the city and the mainstream social environment, "questioning the ethnic assumptions of belonging

in Britain" (Amin 67). They are the living evidence of the effects of colonial times and postcolonial politics, and these new times require a "third space", beyond traditional opposing binaries.

A lot of postcolonial fiction portrays characters that do not fit, are forever outside, "figures with hyphenated identities, living hybrid realities, which pose problems for classification and control, as well as raising questions about notions of essential difference" (Bromley 5). Discussing difference implies comparing, and in this context it is difficult to establish with what, whom and when this comparison should focus on. Basically, these narratives talk about threshold spaces, in which the process of identity building constantly develops alongside questions of space, voice and legitimacy. In these fictional works, the loose concept of diasporic communities seems to allow a cultural framework in which new forms of identity may develop, what Bromley calls "cultures of encounter" (Bromley 7), which create the possibility of multiple belonging within the diversity of cultures. The following chapters thus go on to analyse the different ways in which Sam Selvon, Hanif Kureishi and V. S. Naipaul explore in their fictional work these related themes. Although their protagonists seem to share the same quest, however, belonging will be observed to carry different meanings for each of them.

CHAPTER THREE: *THE LONELY LONDONERS*



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Colonialism has transfigured the scenario of power relationships, establishing discourses of dominant and inferior cultures, which have with time become impregnated in the subconscious of both colonizers and colonized. In the context of cultural production, literature has become a means for writers of (former) colonies to express their voice and portray their world as they see it, a "site where resistance, contestation and change collide to give rise to new, often unpredictable, cultural configurations" (Sindoni xi). In *The Lonely Londoners*, Sam Selvon builds a fictional world where West Indians learn to live away from home, in a city which does not welcome them, where they experience being seen as "others", and his writing reflects this otherness. Within the Caribbean literary tradition, the novel bears traits that are not common in the Western tradition: "the influence of music, the central role of performance, the proliferation of borderline genres, such as calypsoes, or performance poetry, drumbeat, performance theatre" (Sindoni 28) – and while this makes it difficult to be analyzed (or even read) by means of Western theoretical patterns, it creates a feeling of authenticity in the portrait of what has been a historical experience, and has led to headings as in the *Financial Times*, "The definitive novel about London's West Indians". His own experience as a Trinidadian living in London made it possible for Selvon to achieve a "more fully realized picture of the world back home and (…) to define and establish a Caribbean consciousness as it redefined itself within a British context" (Nasta 71) – the protagonist of this novel, Moses Aloetta, like his biblical namesake, experiences alienation in the wilderness of the big metropolis; he spends ten years working and struggling in London without achieving either economic stability or integration in British society; but in the end he eventually

finds a new voice / language, like Selvon did, which might allow him to construct a Caribbean-British identity.

Despite the novel's seemingly random succession of episodes, there is a carefully built structure, which includes forward action, starting with the arrival of Henry Oliver (alias Sir Galahad) in the city and his first years there, and flashbacks regarding Moses's arrival and settlement; this structure allows a permanent comparison between the early days, when black communities were starting to settle, and the present days, when the high immigration figures begin to frighten England: "English people don't like the boys coming to England to work and live. (…) they frighten that we get job in front of them, though that does never happen. The other thing is that they just don't like black people" (TLL 39). The simplicity of how Moses explains the situation makes it sound even harder to understand or justify, and throughout the novel there are a lot of episodes that show how difficult it is for these West Indian "boys" to deal with discrimination they cannot rationally explain.

Written by a West Indian and intending to portray West Indian experiences in London, all aspects of the novel incorporate its origins. There are strong similarities to the traditional Caribbean calypso, both in form and subject matter. Nick Bentley refers to four main characteristics of the narrative techniques used by Selvon, which bear resemblance to calypso's popular form: "First, the novel's attempt to reconstitute an oral tradition in a form recognizable to English literary culture. Second, the episodic structure of the novel corresponds to the calypso's use of disconnected narratives. Third, the calypso is characterized by its use of comic situations, exaggerated events, picaresque characters and carnival sensibilities and excesses (…). Lastly, the calypso, through its use of satirical comment, produces a politically engaged form that challenges dominant political and cultural codes and practices" (Bentley 273). Sam Selvon himself in interviews referred to the episodic structure of the novel as a means to portray the disconnection and oscillation of mood which are central to the "London experience".

Throughout the novel there are many episodes lived by different characters which do not appear particularly significant. Brought together, however, these narratives form a "process of accumulation by which individual experiences contribute to the expression of the communal experience of exile, focused on the central themes of alienation, racial prejudice and survival" (Bentley 276). Small details such as lack of knowledge regarding how public transports function become relevant in showing how difficult adaptation to life in a big city is for these immigrants: they are not used to queues - "When the bus come, Galahad pushing in front of the other people (…) Galahad had to stand up and watch all the people who was there before him get on the bus (…) and a girl tell a fellar she was with 'They'll have to learn to do better, you know.'" (TLL 44); they had never travelled by underground before - "But was plenty different when she find sheself in the station, and the idea of going under the ground in this train nearly make she turn back" (TLL 82).

The language used is another element binding the novel to the origin of its author. Selvon kept close to Trinidadian speech and dialect and applied non-standard English both to the characters' dialogue and the narrating voice. As Bentley points out, "The use of non-standard English also serves to disrupt the linguistic authority of the colonial centre through the importation of alternative forms of syntax and vocabulary. This replicates, in a linguistic form, the radical presence of the (post)colonized individual in the (old) colonial centre" (278). In addition, the use of West Indian slang words, elisions and contractions, as well as deviation from syntax rules, help create a tone of "authenticity" in the fictional world portrayed and confer vivacity to the text. The effects of this choice of language extend beyond the text itself: "Manipulation of linguistic forms is an important means by which Caribbean writers proclaim their sense of place (and displacement), and construct a distinct identity in terms of difference to a dominant construction of Englishness" (Bentley 278). This appropriation of language and its use in literary context is a means for the author to claim his own voice as a writer in the English language.

One of the fictional devices used by Selvon, which is considered modernist, is the stream of consciousness, a narrative mode which portrays the individual's

point of view by conveying the character's thought processes. It usually appears in the form of a loose interior monologue or in connection to characters' actions, and is characterized by associative leaps in thought and lack of punctuation. The stream of consciousness sections in the novel "emphasize the construction by dominant white culture of black identity reflected back through the consciousness of the alienated black individual" (Bentley 269), as the narrating voice, gradually merging with Moses's, describes and simultaneously tries to analyze life in the city for the "boys", and how they are seen by the native population. Considering the image that English girls have of black men, we read: "the cruder you are the more the girls like you you can't put on any English accent for them or play ladeda or tell them you studying medicine in Oxford or try to be polite and civilize they don't want that sort of thing at all they want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles of the world" (TLL 108). The stereotypes built around black sexuality based on literature and cinema create a certain expectation, that the characters try to match in order to take advantage of the situation and thus be able to enjoy the company of English girls – it is the only aspect in which there is some kind of contact between the two otherwise clearly divided social groups.

The lack of punctuation and the free flow of language convey immediacy of thought, which can be interpreted both as the need for the voice to exteriorize painful impressions and thoughts in an emotional flow without even stopping to organize them, and the feeling that some sort of relief might come by letting it all out without interruptions or the inevitable restriction one applies when actually talking to someone: "As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they fraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much about everything would be a big calamity – like how he here now, the thoughts so heavy like he unable to move his body" (TLL 142). This is a conclusion Moses eventually admits, but he keeps it to himself.

"Humor defines the West Indian response to the human condition at all times, but most often when things are "brown"" (Salick 10). The sense of humour is indeed a pervading characteristic in *The Lonely Londoners*, both regarding the narrating voice and the characters, through their dialogues, and is a defense

mechanism against the hardships they have to endure – if they turn their experiences into funny anecdotes and can make the group laugh about it, this somehow relieves the individual burden. The light tone of the descriptions does not hide, however, the struggle of their daily life, as when the narrator refers to how some of them keep visiting Moses just to eat his food: "When Bart go round by Moses Moses would say: 'Take a plate from the cupboard and hit a pigfoot and rice,' and though the way he say it is no invitation, Bart lost to all intonation of voice: sometimes when Moses say 'No' Bart does hear 'Yes.'" (TLL 64). Also, the sense of humor "helps the immigrant locate himself spiritually; sharing linguistic structures with fellow immigrants establishes a deep cultural nexus" (Salick 10), and the stories exchanged are often related to people and situations back home, which helps diminish the feeling of distance, both physical and emotional: "Brackley? Charlotte Street? But how you mean? You think I would be living in Port of Spain and don't know Brackley! Ain't he is the fellar who ain't have no nose, and he always riding about town on a ladies bicycle (…) And if you tell him anything he curse you like hell?" (TLL 127).

Besides the comicality of the situations the "boys" live and narrate each other, there is another type of humour present in the novel, which is "produced through the encounter between a romantic and naïve Caribbean sensibility and the harsh realities of life in London" (Bentley 275); through narrating episodes which result in humorous accounts of that clash, Selvon succeeds in showing the alienation of the characters, their sense of displacement which derives from general prejudice and from the dominant culture's construction of a black identity which does not match the men's own perception of themselves.

The gradual awareness of this constructed image is quite visible in the following excerpt, when Galahad is remembering situations of colour discrimination, looks at the colour of his hand and addresses it: "Colour, is you that causing all this, you know. Why the hell you can't be blue, or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you!" (TLL 88). The scene is paradigmatic of this alienation, showing the character projecting his blackness as an external category, a characteristic

which is not intrinsic to how he sees himself, but a construction projected onto him from an exterior perspective.

The novel begins with a description of London which conveys the feeling of estrangement lived by the characters in their unnatural habitat: “One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet” (TLL 23). The city is experienced as an alien environment, and the “unnaturalness of the new surroundings is a direct correlation of the sense of deracination and homelessness that Moses and “the boys” experience” (Salick 11). Even though he has been living in London for ten years, Moses Aloetta still feels a stranger there, unable to bond with the place or the people.

The references to winter and fog accentuate the distance towards the Caribbean island he came from, Trinidad, and throughout the novel there are often moments of contrast between the vibrant colours of the Caribbean and the grey tones of London, the warmth of home and the inhospitable weather of England, the cheerful songbirds from his memory and the urban disharmony of his present life. “As Homi Bhabha has identified, description of the weather is a strategy often used in postcolonial texts to represent the distance between ‘cold’ English culture, with its emotional connotations, and the heat of tropical and desert climates” (Bentley 285). This coldness associated with life in London is repeatedly mentioned in connection with descriptions of the weather: “so the sun in the sky like a forceripe orange and it giving no heat at all and the atmosphere like a sullen twilight hanging over the big city (…) a kind of grey nasty colour does come to the sky and it stay there and you forget what it like to see blue skies like back home” (TLL 102).

This home / London duality pervades the novel and reaches deeper levels: “the process of migration is not simply a journey through space (ship), an encounter with place (the city, the room), but also an exploration of how the language of space impacts on the very construction of identity and home (the resident)” (Low 171). This journey “from innocence to experience” (as it was

described by Kenneth Ramchand in his introduction to the novel) is painful at various levels, and the characters must develop strategies to overcome both mundane hardships and spiritual disintegration. Sometime after he has arrived, in one of the introspective moments he has when he is alone, Galahad wonders "Lord, what it is we people do in this world that we have to suffer so? What it is we want that the white people and them find it so hard to give? A little work, a little food, a little place to sleep. We not asking for the sun, or the moon. We only want to get by" (TLL 88). His high expectations regarding the city and the possibilities it would offer have by now faded, despite his natural optimism, and he is unable to understand the general resistance he feels towards West Indian immigrants.

Regarding the dimension of work, which constitutes the basis of existence for these immigrants, their blackness sentences them to be given the most menial jobs, mainly in factories and construction sites: "they want to put you in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think that is all we good for, and this time they keeping all the soft clerical jobs for them white fellars" (TLL 52). They often get the night shift, and are paid less than white workers: "the work is a hard work and mostly is spades they have working in the factory, paying lower wages than they would have to pay white fellars" (TLL 67).

As to housing, they are confined in a black enclave, whose boundaries are clearly defined: in the west by "the Gate" (Notting Hill), in the east by "the Arch" (Marble Arch), in the north by "the Water" (Bayswater). Not everybody is willing to rent a place to coloured immigrants: "at this stage Moses know which part they will slam door in your face and which part they will take in spades" (TLL 25). When they do get accepted as tenants, the places where they live are bleak: "The houses around here old and grey and weatherbeaten, the walls cracking like the last days of Pompeii, it ain't have no hot water (…) Some of the houses still had gas light, which is to tell you how old they was" (TLL 73). The cultural reference to the ruins of the ancient Roman city destroyed by a volcanic eruption within a speech marked by Caribbean English syntax stresses the sense of strangeness.

With a deeply urban landscape, London for these immigrants is a place made up of small rooms / houses which enclose people: "London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you

don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers" (TLL 74). As a reaction to this dividing tendency of the city, the men often get together in one of their rooms, or hang out in the hostels populated with single male immigrants, chatting and sharing stories which take place in their closed experience. Rooms thus gain the character of temporary spaces of communal feeling: "Gatherings in rooms offer some reprieve from the hostile world outside. More importantly, they literally enable an exchange of voices and stories. By so doing, rooms become the sites of identification" (Low 172). With Moses as the central figure, these different narrating voices converge into what could be called a "poetics of Caribbean identity", in an appropriation of the city spatial structures, if only temporary. The men thus "negotiate the city inside 'their' language, while trying to come to terms with the grim reality of the city outside it" (Procter 49), almost as if this language of theirs is able to filter and translate the city into narratives that the men can recognize and participate in; language is handled as a possibility to reinvent the city, making it less menacing.

Towards the end of the novel, however, the characters "appear to become increasingly detached from the city, the dynamism characterizing much of the text seems increasingly exhausted" (Procter 50). Despite their initial enthusiasm and association, London remains for them ultimately a "strange world", where the men gradually develop fragmented personalities, unable to assimilate the differences. The episodes become gloomier, like the one in which Galahad kills a pigeon in Kensington Gardens: "Now when Galahad did reach back home, and he sit down and start to pick the bird feather, he start to feel guilty. All he try to argue with himself that he only do it because he hungry and things brown, still the feeling that he do a bad thing wouldn't leave him" (TLL 125). The initial fascination with the city is gradually replaced by a sense of hostility and disappointment, as "innocence" is replaced by "experience".

Moses Aloetta was in the first waves of Caribbean immigrants to England, long before the "Windrush" generation, and although he started his life in the metropolis already as an adult, it is still possible to read the novel as a coming-of-age narrative, portraying the gradual emergence of its protagonist from the group

as an individual, looking for ways to find his place in a world that insists on making him feel like a stranger. In the words of Mark Stein, the novel depicts a paradigmatic development by "charting the growth of its central character, Moses Aloetta, from immigrant to settler" (Stein 31). His valuable knowledge of the city is helpful to the newcomers, and Moses acts almost like a father-figure to them, helping them find a job and accommodation, and teaching them the basics about living in the big city, although he moans about it: "'I don't know why the hell you come to me.' But all the same he went out with them, because he used to remember how desperate he was when he was in London for the first time and didn't know anybody or anything" (TLL 25). He functions as a safe harbor to his disoriented fellow countrymen and becomes the central figure, around which all stories and episodes take place and are told. Moses is linked to the West Indian community and to the city, which he knows and introduces to them, and "each time Moses helps someone settle, he further affirms and establishes himself as a local with knowledge of his neighborhood and so reinforces his understanding of Britain as home, as part of him" (Vickers 15). In the first part of the novel, Moses appears to be unaware of this gradual detachment from his homeland and growing link to the place he now inhabits, and he experiences contradictory feelings: on the one hand he does not seem to miss his homeland ("When he get to Waterloo he hop off and went in the station, and right away in that big station he had a feeling of homesickness that he never felt in the nine-ten years he in this country" - TLL 25); on the other hand, he feels nostalgic when he thinks of one day leaving England: "Still, the station is that sort of place where you have a soft feeling. It was here that Moses did land when he come to London, and he have no doubt that when the time come, if it ever come, it would be here he would say goodbye to the big city. Perhaps he was thinking is time to go back to the tropics, that's why he feeling sort of lonely and miserable" (TLL 26).

Among the anonymous countrymen Moses helps to settle, there is the one he names Sir Galahad (because of his overwhelming enthusiasm and detachment from reality), a young West Indian arriving in London full of dreams of success and completely inexperienced (he does not bring any luggage, is wearing light summer clothes in winter time, he does not even buy rum and cigarettes on the boat, where

they are much less expensive than in the city). The arrival of Galahad opens the narrative, with his first experiences of life in the metropolis. Moses begins teaching him about life in London: “You going to meet a lot of fellars from home who don’t even want to talk to you, because they have matters on their mind. So the sooner you get settled the better for you. London not like Port of Spain. Don’t ask plenty questions, and you will find out a lot” (TLL 37) – he is warning him about how he must be ready to adapt and face hardships, now that he is away from everything that was known to him. Despite Galahad’s apparent ease, the first time he ventures on his own in the city he feels the despair of being alone in such a strange environment, full of people going somewhere, which is described almost like an alien place: “The sun is shining, but Galahad never see the sun look like how it looking now. No heat from it, it just there in the sky like a force-ripe orange. When he look up, the colour of the sky so desolate it make him more frighten (…). A feeling come over him as if he lost everything he have” (TLL 42).

The men can only experience some sense of safety and integration when they are together, telling funny stories of other countrymen or boasting about their sexual adventures with English women, as if the act of narrating, in their own dialect and among their group, somehow grants them some sense of belonging, and thus some legitimacy to claim ownership of the place they inhabit. When on their own, the experience is always negative, scary, disintegrating, and they feel outsiders, unable to overcome the gap which is there, between them and the rest of the population: “though they are circumscribed by a social structure, that is, British society, they are not part of that structure. In Selvon’s representation, absence is here twofold: not only an absence from society, but also an absence of it” (Forbes 79-80). The structures they had from home have been dissolved with distance, and there is no social structure available to sustain their sense of identification. Symbolically, most characters are always referred to by nicknames (Sir Galahad, Big City, Five Past Twelve) and their real names are not known.

They try to configure identity in terms of gender, asserting their masculinity, but their sexual encounters are void, they lack meaning within a global social structure. It is relevant that the boys do not get involved with women from their background: in Selvon’s literary world, women are efficient in recreating West

Indian social spaces, thus transforming the space they inhabit. Tanty is the best example of this female appropriation of the city, being able to persuade the shop owners to establish credit, a system she was used to in Trinidad, and being called Tanty, a designation from back home, by everybody in the neighbourhood; their ability to establish themselves and make a space of their own is threatening to the men and an evidence of their own failure. The men thus look for white women, with whom there are fewer expectations. The situation is necessarily temporary, since the black / white gap is impossible to overcome - when Bart meets his girlfriend's parents he is immediately rejected by her father: "The father want to throw Bart out the house, because he don't want no curly-hair children in the family" (TLL 65). The relief is only temporary though, and this anonymous contact does not provide any ground on which they might develop as human beings; symptomatically, throughout the novel they are designated "the boys", indicating they have not been able to grow out of adolescent behavior and systems of references: they have no family responsibilities, no steady job, no economic stability, characteristics which usually (mainly in more traditional societies) define manhood. They turn to the group and share common episodic stories, trying to build a thread of meaningful orientation, holding on to each other, but this also provides only temporary relief. "In the verbal strategies of advance and retreat around social memory, these unassigned narrative voices, taken together, indicate both the sense of namelessness (loss of identity) and the idea of a collective disintegration that in itself becomes identification. In London, this is what characterizes the boys as West Indians" (Forbes 81). They are indeed *lonely Londoners*, deeply isolated, both as a group and as individuals.

As Moses continues Galahad's "education" in city life, the contrast between his lack of enthusiasm and apathy, and Galahad's excitement becomes more and more visible, for example regarding iconic places of the city: "Jesus Christ, when he say Charing Cross, when he realise that is he, Sir Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about (it even have the name in the dictionary) he feel like a new man" (TLL 84). Moses recognizes he was once as excited, but has now lost the ability to vibrate, daily struggle and lack of purpose have turned the London experience into an empty routine for him: "Ah, in

you I see myself, how I was when I was new to London. All them places is like nothing to me now" (TLL 85). This "sense of nothingness" is something Moses gradually becomes aware of by witnessing Galahad's innocence. Contrasting with all that Galahad is experiencing, Moses feels tired, he has been there, done that, and there seems to be nothing else waiting to be discovered, as when Galahad is enthusiastically telling Moses about a date with an English girl: "though all of that is nothing to a old veteran like Moses, is only to Galahad is new because is the first time with a white number. Moses smile a knowing smile, a tired smile, and 'Take it easy,' he tell Sir Galahad" (TLL 93). This sense of weariness is patent in the advice he gives him repeatedly, "Take it easy", as if trying to prevent him from getting disappointed. "But the reader sees that even if Galahad is to suffer disillusion, Moses has lost something vital. With metropolitan pressure, the Galahad in himself has faded" (Ramchand 15). Indeed, the Galahad in Moses has undergone an unconscious process of painful growing up, which he now begins to acknowledge, when forced to revisit his past and seeing the world around him through Galahad's still innocent eyes.

"The paring of Moses and Galahad allows for a complex structure of retrospection and reflection, as Moses reviews his own experience of coming to London through his now more experienced and melancholic eyes" (MacPhee, 120). In fact, Galahad is a kind of younger Moses, a suggestion reinforced by the flashbacks of Moses's early days as he accompanies Galahad in search of the first job or the first accommodation: "When Moses did arrive fresh in London, he look around for a place (…) where he could meet the boys and coast a old talk to pass the time away – for this city powerfully lonely when you on your own" (TLL 47). This feeling of loneliness has accompanied Moses ever since he arrived in England, and it is a feeling that encompasses the whole narrative.

Moses is the one who "takes care" of the boys, advises and listens to them, and "every Sunday morning they coming to Moses, like if is confession (…) everybody asking what happening but nobody like they know what happening, laughing kiff-kiff at a joke" (TLL 138). As the biblical Moses, he becomes a kind of a leader, with more self-awareness than the men who follow him. "Sometimes, listening to them, he look in each face, and he feel a great compassion for every

one of them, as if he live each of their lives, one by one, and all the strain and stress come to rest on his own shoulders" (TLL 139). He develops a sense of responsibility towards the men, as if he would like to spare them the pains he has experienced and the consciousness of their reality: the disillusion of life in London, so unlike the unstated promises formulated back home ("one time when newspapers say that the West Indians think that the streets of London paved with gold" – TLL 24); realizing that "home" is something he cannot aspire to, since the home he has been dreaming of is not real (the real Trinidad is a place he was forced to leave in order to try a better life), and he is never going to feel at home in London, he is always going to be seen as "the other" ("Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes, but you can't go in their house and eat or sit down and talk. It ain't have no sort of family life for us here" – TLL 130); accepting that, after ten years of hard work and miserable life conditions, it is not going to get better, that this miserable getting by and survival is all they can aspire to ("sometimes tears come to his eyes and he don't know why really, if is home-sickness or if is just that life in general beginning to get too hard" – TLL 139). He realizes that beneath the distraction provided by the talks and jokes with the boys, he has grown older and his life is indeed empty: "Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country" (TLL 141). This does not just apply to him, it applies to all "spades", and is related to their condition as black immigrants. Almost like Moses the prophet, this Moses does not foresee a better future for his "boys" in London.

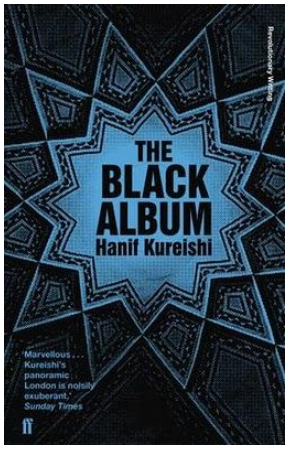
By revisiting his past against the present scenario Moses begins questioning his present life and the point of going on just struggling to get by, with no other perspectives: "and Moses sigh a long sigh like a man who live life and see nothing at all in it and who frighten as the years go by wondering what it is all about" (TLL 110). He gradually loses contours as one of the group, to grow as an introspective character, whose voice slowly merges with the narrator's, expressing his thoughts on the value of action in a world which seems predetermined: "Things

does have a way of fixing themselves, whether you worry or not. If you hustle, it will happen, if you don't hustle, it will still happen. Everybody living to dead, no matter what they doing while they living, in the end everybody dead" (TLL 67). This almost nihilistic perspective accounts for Moses's passivity and inability to reach decisions - either deciding to return home (an option which he repeatedly talks about as a distant life project) or assuming he is in fact never going to leave England.

At the beginning of the novel Moses is a character whose actions and words are commented on by a narrator, a third-person voice which is above the narrative and elaborates on the characters' doings. Towards the end, however, "there is a significant identification between narrator and the growing central character" (Ramchand 17); Moses gradually incorporates the narrating voice's consciousness as he becomes aware of his losses, of what he has given up in order to be able to adapt to the new environment. The progression of the seemingly random episodes of the novel leads to a growing introspection and analyses, in what can be seen as "Moses's individuation, and his emergence as a thinking creature" (Ramchand 18), someone who is capable of articulating his identity and position, even if these are not clearly defined. As Ramchand puts it, in a reference to William Blake, an icon of British literature which has been taught in the colonies, "the birth of consciousness is the beginning of our participation in that perennial effort to sing simultaneously our songs of innocence and experience" (Ramchand 19). Moses becomes conscious of his detached role towards the group (he foresees the perpetuation of this lifestyle and has outgrown any youthful dreams of actually making it in the big city). He acknowledges that the group is in fact enclosed in the ritualistic exchange of words, not going anywhere, never going to achieve a sense of belonging in the grey, not gold, London. After revisiting his past, he is now in the position to recognize how wasted his existence has been so far. One could say Moses has completed a rite of passage, eventually succeeding in crossing a threshold, "a space suggestive both of transition and transformation, a location that represents the borderland of both old and new possibilities" (Nasta 66). In the end, Selvon suggests that Moses, like Selvon himself is doing, is going to write a novel portraying his experiences as an immigrant in London, in what can

be seen as the search for “an individual voice to define a new reality for the Caribbean writer in London” (Nasta 81). Moses has been able to move forward, unlike the rest of the men, and understand the need to replace old repetitive narratives sustained by a language tied to “back home” and therefore void of reality in the new world, and find a new language for his existence, suitable to express both his past and his present, opening new routes for the future.

CHAPTER FOUR: *THE BLACK ALBUM*



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Some of the new routes to the future gestured towards in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* can be seen in Hanif Kureishi's very different *The Black Album*. In this novel, Shahid Hasan, the protagonist, is representative of a group of young Asians who, unlike the previous generations of immigrants of their parents and of Selvon's "boys", "are young people who have grown up routinely mixing Eastern and Western markers of identity, through language, bodily expression, music, and consumer habits, who are not confused about their identities and values as cultural hybrids" (Amin 68). They presume their Britishness, and feel entitled to claim the rights that are associated with it, such as making their own choices and not feeling compelled to behave according to stereotypes which dictate that minorities should keep a low profile and stay within the assigned roles of hard-workers trying to make a better living in the host country. These are Asians born in England, surrounded and informed by mainstream cultural references, which they claim as part of their "inheritance".

At the same time, they have grown up within families who are still strongly connected to their homelands (either in the sense of keeping traditions and habits or in the sense of rejecting them, as is the case of Shahid's father). They usually spend their childhood and adolescence in neighbourhoods mainly inhabited by other immigrants, in communities which function as enclaves within the English society, simultaneously preserving lifestyles they have brought from the former colonies (mostly regarding gastronomy, language, clothes and religiosity) and closing themselves to the outside mainstream society. The process of growing up is therefore signalled by contrast, and often rejection of these community markers, as young Asians experience more of the world outside their communities and

acquire British / Western cultural references, for example regarding pop culture and music, pervading areas of extreme importance for teenagers living in Europe. As pointed out by Bart Moore-Gilbert, Hanif Kureishi's texts often deal with the "conflict between the claims of inherited cultural tradition, to which older British-Asians in his work tend to be loyal, (…) and the aspirations of their children to participate more fully in mainstream British society" (Moore-Gilbert 20). Differently from his father (who still feels Pakistan as his homeland and regrets the state in which the country is) and his uncle Asif (still living in a Pakistan where he has been in prison for disagreeing with the process of cultural Islamization), who are connected to Pakistan through their personal life stories, for Shahid "the argument that matters is happening on the streets of London over what form of identity he and his fellow students will construct in a Britain that refuses to recognize them as embodiments of its culture" (Williams n/p).

The cultural hybridity which defines these young Asians is something that does not pose identity problems for them, but there is another element in the equation, which is the visible face of their origins, their ethnicity, which prevents them from blending with the white population as their equal. The noticeable difference leads to racial and ethnic labelling, which in the confusing context of postcolonialism and increasing crisis of values of the capitalist system is usually linked to discrimination and consequent isolation. The inevitable segregation (and the humiliation and consequent rage) has promoted the development of strong kinship ties among British-Asian youth, and this sense of group belonging has provided courage to claim their share of being born in Britain, visible for example in the riots which took place throughout the 1980s and 1990s in several cities in England. As Ash Amin writes, "Theirs was a strong claim of ownership of particular bits of turf in these towns of racialised space allocation (…) it was an act of questioning the ethnic assumptions of belonging in Britain" (Amin 67). That was an extreme reaction to a growing feeling of displacement, caused by a lack of social structures able to accommodate this hybrid identity: "this confusion – this sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere – left some young British Muslims susceptible to indoctrination by religious-political groups which offered a strong identity framework" (Vickers 5). The novel was written in 1995, shortly after the above

mentioned incidents, but Kureishi set the narrative in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall – the dismantlement of the communist Soviet Union shook convictions and certainties regarding political directions, reinforcing arguments in favour of religious belief. 1989 was also the year of the *fatwah* against Salman Rushdie because of his book *The Satanic Verses*, and there are constant references in the novel to Rushdie (although his name is never actually mentioned) and the book, culminating in the extreme decision of the Muslim group Shahid is becoming familiar with of burning the book publicly, to show their disapproval of its contents regarding the Islamic faith. However, Kureishi is careful not to turn the novel into some kind of accusation against one single group; instead, he shows that the climate of violence is general, as with the indirect reference to the IRA bombings in London in 1991. This thread of violence present in the novel portrays the connection between identity and anti-social behavior, and can be seen as a warning of the danger of all kinds of extremism. In fact, the novel suggests that London, as a symbol for the postcolonial scenario of the mixture of peoples which come from the rigid social structures imposed by colonialism, and now experience a no less rigid (although hidden) structure of first- and second-class citizens, of native and non-native British citizenship, is a reality where racism and political discontent lead to cultural alienation, and thus breed fundamentalism in all its variants.

The city is shown, like in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, in its divided sections according to people's origins and economic status, and in the poor area Shahid inhabits one can sense the misery which corrodes human beings and dehumanizes them, in what is referred to as "mundane poverty": "On his first day he had seen a poor woman, wearing only plastic sandals on her feet, drag three children across the street and, there on the other side, remove her shoes and beat them across the arms" (TBA 3). Chad mentions another aspect of the city, as being a place "With many temptations for young men" (TBA 15) – and he has experienced these temptations, when he lived on alcohol and drugs and involved with prostitution. The descriptions of the poor parts of the city portray a hostile location, where people and places are hopeless: "There was only broken glass

beneath his feet and a black kid crashing across the pavement on a bicycle, pitching it down and running into a burger man; a man with his head over a rubbish bag, stuffing half a pie into his mouth, and a woman screaming from a window, 'Go away, cunt, or I'll sort you!' Two people lay end to end in a rain-swept doorway under a mound of newspapers and cardboard; empty cider bottles stood at their head like skittles" (TBA 16). Among the population of different origins there is discrimination, as drug dealer Snapper tells Shahid: "You wanna find someone who hates another race? (…) Just knock on any door" (TBA 143). London feels like a world on its own, from where there is no escape: "You could drive for two or three hours through this limitless city which had no shape, and not come out on the other side" (TBA 57). This is an environment which accentuates alienation and emphasizes isolation: "He had never felt more invisible; somehow this wasn't the 'real' London" (TBA 5) – Shahid had created an imaginary London as a place full of opportunities, where he would be able to meet people with whom he could share his interest in literature, art and knowledge, a place that would provide him with a sense of belonging: "Shahid wanted a new start with new people in a new place. The city would feel like his; he wouldn't be excluded; there had to be ways in which he could belong" (TBA 16). This portrait bears a strong resemblance with the imaginary London of Selvon's characters, before the harsh reality of the city dismantled their fictional London.

Shahid and most of the British-Asians he meets in London have experienced discrimination, witnessing Asian immigrants being attacked for being outsiders, and do not expect any reaction from the authorities. The Thatcher era is depicted as one fostering free enterprise and focused on capitalist principles, not intervening in problematic social areas. "Against a lack of state ideology, *The Black Album* suggests that the only realistic alternative for an alienated British Muslim youth is a fundamentalist ideology which offers them the sense of rootedness and belonging so lacking in a depoliticized and apathetic British state" (Upstone 10). Young men like Shahid, Hat or Chad easily feel attracted to a movement that offers an organized and structured view of the world, where they have a determined place and function, and can contribute to a greater cause, thus

overcoming individual fissures caused by their inability to be accepted in the society they live in.

This is most visible in the character now called Chad, adopted by a white English couple but never feeling one of them: “He’d see English country cottages and ordinary English people who were secure, who effortlessly belonged. You know, the whole Orwellian idea of England (…) When he got to be a teenager he saw he had no roots, no connections with Pakistan, couldn’t even speak the language (…) Trevor Buss’s soul got lost in translation” (TBA 106-107). This sense of exclusion and alienation led the teenager Trevor to rebellious behavior involving alcohol and drugs, until he met “Brother Riaz”; he changed his name to a Muslim name and by joining a Muslim group and religion, he found the roots he was missing, thus becoming a zealous adept of the “cause”, very extreme and intolerant to anything else. His deep commitment can be seen when he talks to Shahid about Prince, whose music he used to love, and now rejects, although one can see it requires great self-discipline: “Pop music is not good for me. Nor for anyone. Why are you making me think about that now? (…) Chad tore himself away from Prince, stood up and took in the contents of the room” (TBA 19). Chad, “who functions in the novel as Shahid’s alter ego, a dangerous warning of what Shahid may become if he fails to come to terms with what it means to be a British Muslim” (Upstone 15).

The title of the novel establishes an immediate connection with the American pop artist Prince, alias ☥ (an unpronounceable symbol also called the Love symbol), alias “the Artist formerly known as Prince” (among other names he has adopted), since it is one of his albums. This artist is a repeated reference in the novel and his plurality symbolically represents the world Shahid unconsciously fantasizes about, a world with no defined boundaries, where one is able to continuously redefine oneself. “In Prince, famous for his makeovers and aliases, Kureishi most graphically represents pop as the crossroads not only of different cultural influences but as a site in which plurality of identity – whether at the level of ethnicity, class, gender or sexuality – is celebrated” (Moore-Gilbert 117): Prince is a multiple artist (singer, song-writer, musician, actor), plays multiple instruments,

and has created what would become known as “the Minneapolis sound”, a hybrid music style with varied influences such as funk, rock, pop, R&B, new wave, blues and jazz (he has been able to create something new out of pre-existing categories). He is “half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too” (TBA 25). He is also American, which asserts a feeling of open possibilities to the process of identity construction. The title *The Black Album* also establishes, by opposition, a link with The Beatles’ *White Album*. “Dialectically involving the Beatles through Prince’s association, Kureishi sets up two alternative frames of reference (…) by privileging the Black, with the White as an unspoken and silenced Other, Kureishi offers a particular model of identity that interrogates English culture” (Upstone 7). The Beatles stand for the static social scenario resulting from postcolonialism, in which the divide opposing “native white British” and “the others” limits everybody sharing the same space, but not living together. Prince represents transgression of rules and stereotypes, a setting where everything is possible.

Shahid Hasan was born and raised in Kent, in a place where he experienced harassment and bullying at school because of his skin colour and family origins. The “alienation he experienced as a young boy growing up in a Britain where the visible signs of his “race” bore little relation to the realities of his largely “English” cultural background” (Nasta 194) makes him take refuge in the literary and artistic world: “In his bedroom at home Shahid would take art books out from the library and prop them open so that (…) just pacing about lamenting his life, he would look at a Rembrandt or Picasso or Vermeer, and try to understand them” (TBA 19). As a young boy, he tries to process the effects of his distinctiveness by writing down episodes of discrimination in fictional narratives. His first story “was called *Paki Wog Fuck Off Home*. It featured the six boys who comprised the back row of his class at school, who, one day (…) chanted at Shahid, *Paki, Paki, Paki, Out, Out, Out*!” (TBA 72). His mother chose to ignore a reality she could not cope with and disapproves of his stories: “More than anything she hated any talk of race or racism (…) when he returned with cuts, bruises, and his bag slashed with knives, she behaved as if so appalling an insult couldn’t exist.

And so she turned away from him. What she knew was too much for her" (TBA 73). Likewise his father, who values economic stability above all and expects his son to make it either as a businessman or a socially recognized graduate, discourages his literary ambitions: "My nephews are lawyers, bankers and doctors. Ahmed has gone into the hat trade and built a sauna in his house! These artist types are always poor – how will you look relatives in the face? (…) We must (…) live in the real world" (TBA 75). Choosing a path different from his parents, Shahid grows up valuing knowledge and literature as the key elements that might guarantee him access to another world, away from the money-focused existence of his family and an escape from the sense of exclusion: "He had moved from book to book as on stepping stones, both for fun and out of fear of being with people who had knowledge which might exclude him" (TBA 20). At college, he is afraid that the modernist perspectives of his teachers might prevent him from having access to "real" knowledge: "Was it really learning or only diversion dressed up in the latest words? Were students in better colleges studying stuff to give them the advantage in life?" (TBA 26). The world of books becomes a symbol of positive things to be achieved: "he associated scholarship, study and the thirst for knowledge with goodness" (TBA 14).

Soon after his father dies, Shahid goes to London to study at college, where he stays in a students' house in north-west London. "The many rooms in the six-floor building were filled with Africans, Irish people, Pakistanis and even a group of English students" (TBA 1) and his neighbour Riaz is also Pakistani. When Shahid first meets him, despite suspecting that Riaz's proximity to him hides some intention he cannot yet grasp, Shahid is in a fragile mood, having spent his first weeks in London without much human contact and definitely not much kindness. He surprises himself confiding in Riaz and telling him about his family and life in Kent, and how he used to read texts by acclaimed black writers which brought him in contact with the historical background of the "Black reality": "I sat in the office reading Malcom X and Maya Angelou and the *Souls of Black Folk*. I read about the Mutiny and Partition and Mountbatten. And one morning I started reading *Midnight's Children* in bed" (TBA 9). As Bronwyn T. Williams points out, these texts "provide him with an emerging sense of identity that stands in difference from

and resistance to the dominant white English culture" (Williams n/p); by reading about ethnic discrimination and learning about historical battles, and mainly through hearing Salman Rushdie on TV, he became more aware of his own situation as an outsider within the limited suburban community of Kent, and how he had been defined as the Other. Shahid turns to these literary references trying to understand better what it means not to be white - "Black British opens up the space in which multiple and polyvocal narratives can be constructed in positions of resistance to the dominant culture" (Williams n/p) – and although at first his reaction is one of revolt against being labelled as black, he eventually grasps the importance of these alternative forms of expression.

Besides literature, pop music and pop culture in general are a strong element in Shahid's formation, and music in particular is deeply connected with his moods, his memories and his world vision; in the novel, there are often associations of significant moments with the music that is playing - ironically, the first time he returns home with Riaz and Chad, who in their fundamentalist worldview abhor homosexuality, "someone was playing a Donna Summer record and male squeaks could be heard. Shahid was about to smirk, but intuited quickly that neither of his new friends would share his amusement" (TBA 14); another example of the use of music to establish meaning is when Deedee is putting make-up on Shahid; Madonna's "Vogue" is playing, with all its associations to the *voguing* dance style originated in Harlem created by African- and Latino-Americans and characteristic of the gay scene: "Madonna said, 'What are you looking at?' He loved that track. (…) he felt he were losing himself. (…) but he liked the feel of his new female face. He could be demure, flirtatious, teasing, a star; a burden went, a certain responsibility had been removed" (TBA 117). The scene suggests his willingness to try different possibilities of identity, beyond the socially established binaries (race, gender, religion).

Beyond these moments in which everything seems open to be explored, however, society seems to be organized into groups and expecting everybody to fit in: "The black kids stuck with each other, the Pakistanis went to one another's houses, the Bengalis knew each other from way back, and the whites too. (…) More pressingly, if everyone was so hastily adhering to their own group, where did

he belong?" (TBA 134). Ethnicity seems to be the most immediate link: "The man blinked at Shahid through the gloom and seemed to bar his way. Shahid was about to apologize when his neighbor said a word in Urdu. Shahid replied, and the man, as if having an idea confirmed, took another step forward, offered his hand and introduced himself as Riaz Al-Hussain" (TBA 1). Riaz is originally from Lahore, he "was brought away" to England at the age of fourteen and studies law; he is the charismatic leader of a group of young Muslims and the support / legal adviser for many Pakistani immigrants living in the area. Like the many other young Asians who follow him devotedly, Shahid feels drawn to him and the to the idea of being part of a community, playing a meaningful role, as when Riaz chooses him to convert his hand-written book of poems into print: "Now, some others have volunteered but I have been thinking a few days that you are the right person for this task" (TBA 68). When a family of Bengali immigrants is attacked, the group decides to guard the house and protect the family, and Shahid is asked to join them: "His blood was warming; he felt a physical pride in their cause, whatever it was. He was one with the regiment of brothers and sisters" (TBA 83). Although he spends most of his time with the group, he does not share their faith; in fact, he experiences anxiety about his lack of faith, seeing how believing in something bigger brings the others a sense of identity, which is what he is looking for: "These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew – brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn't be human. Shahid, too, wanted to belong to his people" (TBA 92). Riaz is clear about his deeply religious worldview: "Without religion society is impossible. And without God people think they can sin with impunity. There's no morality" (TBA 33), and Shahid gradually realizes that they do not seek to know the world as it is: "The problem was, when he was with his friends their story compelled him. But when he walked out, like someone leaving a cinema, he found the world to be more subtle and inexplicable" (TBA 133). Above all, they do not include humanity in their belief system, since they deny their instincts and refuse to include imagination – which, according to William Blake, is "the divine body in every man" – into their word order. Shahid is aware that, in order to truly be accepted into the group, he must adopt this perspective, and he needs a sense of

belonging: “I don’t always want to be on the outside of everything” (TBA 160). However, when the group supports the Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa upon Salman Rushdie, Shahid clearly sees how far their fanaticism can prevent them from taking decisions based on their own conscience: “Then he asked Riaz suddenly, “Would you kill a man for writing a book?” (…) “Stone dead” (TBA 172). The final drop that makes him abandon all hopes of being able to fit in that mentality is when the group decides to burn publicly Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* – ironically, in the college facilities, a place where people supposedly are working on how to expand their minds and contact with new knowledge: “He had left the posse. He hadn’t made a decision: the alliance terminated the moment Hat soaked the book in petrol. He had been taught much about what he didn’t like; now he would embrace uncertainty” (TBA 227). Deedee once tells Shahid she finds the group scary because “They are devoid of doubt” (TBA 110), and now he is able to understand her words.

Still at home, Shahid met a black London kid who told him he had been taught by “a great woman”, and he decided to take the initiative and apply for her course. The first time he is at Deedee Osgood’s office he sees three symbols of what he is trying to accomplish: “Pinned above the desk were pictures of Prince, Madonna and Oscar Wilde, with a quote beneath it, ‘All limitations are prisons’.” (TBA 25). Each in their own way, they represent nonconformity, challenge and creativity, the possibility of asserting individuality and following one’s own path, against the odds. As his teacher, Deedee helps him understand the “black experience” through literature and music, the main interests in his life. She asks him questions about Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison; she plays Hendrix’s “Star Spangled Banner” and Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” in class; she tells her students about America at the time of Martin Luther King. “The living, breathing history of struggle: how had he lived so long without this knowledge? Where had they kept it? Who else were they concealing it from?” (TBA 28). Shahid feels that Deedee can introduce him to knowledge he might otherwise never have access to. Besides this fascination with Deedee the teacher, Shahid feels sexually attracted to Deedee the woman; eventually they

become lovers, and it is the combination of the intellectual and the physical appeal that attracts him so much, she challenges him in all areas (mostly sex and drugs), she pushes him further and further into discovering new sides of himself (wearing make-up and female underwear), she actually practices her motto regarding limits. Deedee is focused on living the present: "'Is life just for pleasure, then?' 'What else is there?'" (TBA 109).

As their relationship develops, however, Shahid gradually realizes the differences that exist between them, mainly the black / white distinction that is often mentioned in the text: the first time they go out together, she takes him to a place called "the white Room" and "as they parted she had apologized for taking him to places where there were only white people" (TBA 65-66); when they are at a coffee house, "People came and went, but he was the only person there with dark skin. That would be the fact in most places he went with Deedee" (TBA 122). The age difference is also relevant, since she has a past life and past struggles which have molded her into who she is now: "most novels, like most lives, could be entitled *Lost Illusions*" (TBA 161), while Shahid is still beginning his personal story. This division becomes more and more relevant as Shahid becomes more involved with the group of British-Asian companions, with whom he feels a kinship that she cannot replace. He feels constantly divided between his wish to merge into their safe organized world within religion, and the world of expanding knowledge and experiences she represents.

The Black Album shows many characteristics of the *Bildungsroman*, beginning with Shahid leaving his parents' house in the outer suburbs in Kent and moving closer in to London, to live for the first time on his own; this journey isolates the protagonist and leaves him unprotected facing hardships that will test his character and determination. Another element common to coming-of-age narratives, as Mark Stein mentions, is conflict: "the conflict of generations is part and parcel of the novel of transformation, and it is of particular importance in that different generations correspond to different cultural and social affiliations" (Stein 25). In the case of Shahid's family, the conflict takes place between him and his parents, but also includes his elder brother and his wife, who have chosen paths

away from the previous generation, but which Shahid does not wish for himself. His parents "had come to England to make an affluent and stable life in a country not run by tyrants" (TBA 53), they became successful according to the standards of the capitalist society they live in, they achieved stability and are content with what they have attained; "it is Shahid, British-born, who, with a sense of denied birthright, wants to challenge the prejudices of British society" (Upstone 15). Stein also mentions that this notion of conflict extends to peers and society in general: "Many novels of transformation can also be charted as a quest for an outlook on life which accommodates the protagonists' own identity, and which is shaped by a struggle with the parental generations, and one's peers and society at large" (Stein 25). Towards his peers, a group of young Muslims deeply committed to the Islam cause, Shahid feels both attracted and repelled: their companionship and ability to commit to a cause resonate as something he desperately wants to share; however, he is not ready to give up either his subjectivity or thirst for new experiences. The other relationship he has is with his college teacher, Deedee, who stands on the extreme opposite: she advocates a hedonistic perspective of life, according to which everything should be experienced and tried in pursuit of pleasure and her motto, "All limitations are prisons", reflects her distance from the Muslim group. It is within this framework that Shahid believes he will find a way to define his identity. "Shahid longs for a stable cultural identity, for features of his own that he can brandish with certainty and stability. Thus he is drawn to and torn among all of the people who touch his life" (Williams n/p) – in fact, instead of approaching some kind of definition, what he feels is confusion because he simultaneously feels attracted to both perspectives, and yet cannot truly identify with any, and the fact that each excludes the other leads to an even greater uncertainty regarding who he is and where he belongs.

The challenge for the protagonist, his central journey towards maturity and self-definition, is "to find an alternative belief system that counters the British lack of direction, but nevertheless offers the freedom and subjectivity necessary for the expression of cross cultural hybrid subjectivity" (Upstone 10). The literary and musical world that are so important to him are also a metaphor for the kind of

society he wishes would exist: one which allows the individual to experiment, to question and to choose, without feeling pressure to fit in any predetermined role with the corresponding expected behavior – what one would call a truly free and tolerant society.

In this novel, as well as in other texts, Kureishi presents an alternative to the traditional conclusion of the *Bildungsroman*: instead of leading the protagonist through a journey at the end of which he has constructed a stable identity, for Shahid "maturity consists in accepting as an ethical principle the terminally polymorphous and unstable nature of selfhood" (Moore-Gilbert 130). Accepting that identity is about becoming (as opposed to being) is a step towards a new perspective, which overcomes binaries and dualities and focuses instead on the momentary act of identification.

Shahid's decision of abandoning the group and rejecting their fundamentalist religion-guided lifestyle shows that he has realized that the appeasement a fundamentalist worldview might bring him would imply limiting his freedom as an individual and narrowing the range of experiences available. When he chooses to stay with Deedee, living a love story which is bound to end sooner or later - "'Until it stops being fun', she said. 'Until then', he said" (*TBA* 276) - he is acknowledging his hybrid identity, aware that this identity is always in motion and open to change and thus able to continuously incorporate new elements.

In the novels by V. S. Naipaul analysed in the next chapter, Willie Chandran, the protagonist, also fights against his family heritage to the extent of leaving his home country in a quest for identity and maturity. Fundamentalism and obstinate world-views are also questioned, as Willie embarks on a life journey that follows the gradual collapse of empires both within the metropolis and elsewhere.

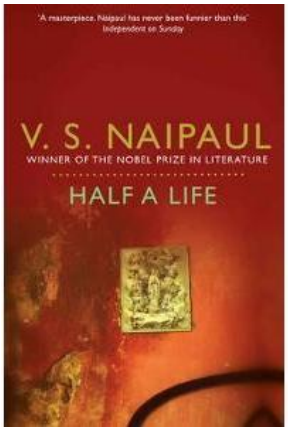
CHAPTER FIVE: *HALF A LIFE* AND *MAGIC SEEDS*

William Somerset Chandran is the protagonist of both novels analysed here, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. In the first novel, we follow his childhood in India, his youth years in London and the first twenty years of his adulthood in Portuguese Africa (a former colony which one can relate to Mozambique). At the age of forty, he leaves Africa and the second novel accompanies the second twenty years of his life, always on the move: a short six-month stop-over in Berlin, then India and finally back in London. At the end of *Magic Seeds*, Willie is considering returning to Berlin. The narrative tone emphasizes this constant movement of the protagonist, as there are not long descriptions, the language is quite objective and the rhythm remains constant. There are regular references to names of places, streets, and landmarks, as on a tour. Willie represents the many "citizens of the world" who are unable to settle down and commit to places and people, products of the colonial experience which has created a world where former colonials who have left their homeland have no stable references and feel uprooted – the world has changed while they were away, and the country they eventually return to is no longer the place they left, while at the same time there are bonds with this homeland that endure. In the western centre of the empire, "the postcolonial subject, made homeless, his identity as indigene made valueless, must accept the categories afforded him in the new order" (Balfour 14); he is mostly seen either as the "fascinating exotic", or repelled as "the inconvenient other". Selvon's immigrants are aware of their lack of status in London, Kureishi's muslims are feared for their fanatism and disregarded as an ethnic minority; Willie's stories are received as "a subversive new voice from the subcontinent" (HL 122).

The profound desolation that transpires from both novels suggests that the sense of belonging Willie Chandran so desperately seeks lies neither in some reactionary nostalgia for the lost order of the imperial system, nor in utopian

visions of the new postcolonial nations. “Naipaul’s uprooted protagonists strive, in diverse ways, to achieve personal integrity and to attach meaning to their existence” (Cichón 2010, 46). These life projects of identity formation are grounded in history – of place (India, Mozambique, England) and of people (the Chandran family, Willie’s father), and Naipaul establishes a parallel between the individual formation of Willie and the formation of the emerging postcolonial nations. Willie’s transnational lifestyle becomes a form of escapism, and any eventual identity construction must take place within westernized patterns of modernity, since there is no possible return to the ancient order of pre-colonial societies and systems.

There are no references whatsoever to Willie’s physical appearance, which increases the effect of estrangement and distance between the reader and the main character; it is also a strategy to reinforce the sense of incompleteness that Willie constantly experiences – not only Willie but most characters in these novels, which could be said to be novels about incompleteness, both personal and of the societies they portray: the former colonies, emergent nations, are presented as places full of cruelty, corruption and lack of authenticity; the former metropolis of the British empire represents the disoriented Western societies in the aftermath of colonialism, trying to come to terms with their loss and still unsure of what the new social scenario will be.



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Half a Life begins with a question Willie asks his father: “Why is my middle name Somerset?” (HL 1). The answer turns into the first chapter, which is narrated by Willie’s father in the first person. He starts with his meeting with the writer Somerset Maugham, which sentenced him to playing a role for the rest of his life. They met when Chandran was hiding temporarily in the courtyard of a temple and had taken a vow of silence; this cowardly solution was wrongly interpreted by the writer, who refers to him in the novel *The Razor’s Edge* as “the man of high caste, high in the maharaja’s revenue service, from a line of people

who had performed rituals for the ruler, turning his back on a glittering career, and living as a mendicant on the alms of the poorest of the poor" (HL 3) and people believed that he had been the spiritual source for the book. This image of him in an internationally acclaimed book which praised the local system and authorities ended his persecution, but made it impossible for Chandran to step out of that constructed identity: "I settled down to live the strange life that fate had bestowed on me" (HL 4). This provided him a way of avoiding facing the problems: "the wish to renounce, hide, run away from the mess I had made of my life" (HL 5) – as Chandran hides behind the role of a holy man in his ashram, so Willie is going to spend most of his life running away as a traveller.

Chandran goes on telling the story of his life, including the previous generations – this family chronicle is relevant in showing how difficult life has always been in India, long before British colonialism, and somehow presenting the reader with possible historical explanations for the fatalism and acceptance of authority and social stratification by most of the Indian poor population. Chandran has his life planned but is aware that the apparent security is misleading. Influenced by the revolutionary movements acting in some parts of the country and by Gandhi's words, he aspires to greatness, wishing to make a difference and thus establish his mark in a chaotic world. Naipaul achieves a humorous description of Chandran's desperate attempts to defy his destiny and the servility of his life ahead. First he burns the books used at university and which represented the British canon and British dominion over India, without any repercussion whatsoever: "Perhaps it hadn't been much of a bonfire. Books aren't so easy to burn, unless you have a good fire already going" (HL 9) – in that part of the country there was no revolutionary fire burning yet, so he stands alone in his revolutionary attempt. Living in a conservative maharaja's state where the independence movement was a distant phenomenon, Chandran decides to try again. Inspired by Gandhi's words against the evils of casteism, he sacrifices himself to a greater cause and decides to marry someone of the lowest caste. He chooses a girl from the backward caste, and works hard to get her attention. The differences he notices between his high ancestry and her low social status place them in separate worlds, and his reaction to her is contradictory: "I was fascinated

and repelled by her (…) I was repelled, ashamed, moved" (HL, 12-13). What began as a juvenile intention soon gains major contours: he is forced by the girl's uncle (a member of the Labourers Union) to marry her and thus abandon the girl he was supposed to marry, daughter of the principal of the maharaja's college, whose father's influence manages to get him fired and facing prison. He finds himself involved in a situation he cannot control or solve, and his reaction is to escape by avoiding it: "caught between the girl and the school principal, the firebrand and the threat of imprisonment (…) I began to think of running away. I began to think of taking sanctuary in the famous old temple in the town. Like my grandfather. At this moment of supreme sacrifice I fell, as if by instinct, into old ways" (HL 26). To protect himself from his persecutors, he takes refuge in the temple and takes a vow of silence, which again brings unexpected consequences: "I became at once a holy man and, because of the firebrand and his niece outside, a political cause" (HL 28) – and here the narrative meets its beginning, when Somerset Maugham visits the temple and meets Chandran. Meanwhile, the caste divide makes Chandran grow more and more ashamed of his wife: "All my anxiety, when little Willie was born, was to see how much of the backward could be read in his features" (HL 33). He withdraws into his melancholy in order to escape his life. The first chapter finishes with the end of Chandran's life story and Willie despising his father, for not offering him anything he can use in his own life. In the words of K. H. Mehta, Willie's father is "a typical product of the Naipaulian half-made society. He is sandwiched between the colonial oppression and the post-colonial anarchy. His personality has been shaped by the imported ideologies of the West and he stands cut off from his native roots" (160). This detachment from roots will also happen to Willie, because of his attendance of a Christian mission school, where teachers were mostly Western and where the British literary canon and Western references were taught, but also because of his mixed ancestry: he is not able to conciliate the passive high-caste Brahmin inheritance from his father with the aggressive backward-caste features of his mother's family.

As children, Willie and his younger sister Sarojini attended a mission school, where their mother had also studied. Gradually Willie realized that mission schools were meant for low caste pupils: "He understood that to go to the mission

school was to be branded, and he began to look at his mother from more and more of a distance. The more successful he became at school – and he was better than his fellows – the greater that distance grew" (HL 39). The type of education provided by the Catholic / Christian-oriented school system "is wholly out of keeping with his cultural and physical context, and (…) alienates him from the intellectual and religious currents of pre-independence India (Balfour 10). This lack of adjustment to the reality he lives in only makes his inner fissure wider, thus increasing his sense of displacement even where he is supposedly "at home". Despising his father for his passivity, considering him a coward and a fraud with his ashram business, and aware of the unbendable low social status of his mother which condemned him, Willie began dreaming of going away and in one text he wrote for school about his holidays he pretended to belong to a Canadian family. "All the details of this foreign life (…) had been taken from American comic books (…) mixed up with local details (…). This composition was awarded full marks (…) and Willie was asked to read it out to the class" (HL 40). The recognition of his imaginative literary skills fed his wish to evade the reality of his family, and this was a prelude of Willie's future literary attempt – as well as the first of many situations in which he would pretend to be another Willie, different from the Willie he became and did not respect.

The following stories Willie wrote as school assignments illustrated his hatred for his mother's origins and his despising of his father's choices; by reading the stories, his father concluded that "His mind is diseased. He hates me and he hates his mother, and now he's turned against himself (…). I cannot deal rationally with this kind of hatred" (HL 47). Once again, his father's solution was to keep a vow of silence and ignore the problem; however, and because he feared what Willie might do, he got him a scholarship in a college of education in London. At the age of twenty, "with no idea of what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew, and yet with very little idea of what lay outside what he knew" (HL 51), Willie went to London. This desire and need to get away from the reality he felt uncomfortable with and in which he felt limited will remain a feature of his character, determining his choices.

As soon as he arrives in London, Willie is made aware that everywhere he goes he will always be recognized as Indian: walking in the street he passes by Krishna Menon, "the close friend of Mr Nehru, and India's spokesman in international forums (…). He looked up, saw Willie, and out of a clouded face flashed him a friendly satanic smile. Willie had never expected to be acknowledged by the great man" (HL 53). This is a sign to Willie that distance from the origin of his problems does not help find a solution, as he will recognize much later. His "meeting" with Krishna Menon makes Willie aware of how know little he knows of the world's history. He blames his father's influence for not noticing what is around him - "This habit of non-seeing" (HL 54); he blames his mother's side for his lack of historical awareness – "the backwards had been shut out for so long from society that they knew nothing of India, nothing of other religions, nothing even of the religion of the people of caste, whose serfs they were" (HL 55). In *Magic Seeds*, Sarojini restates this idea of disconnection with History, saying that the history known in India comes from a British textbook published in the nineteenth century, "it gave us many of the ideas we still have about ourselves (…) in India there were servile races, people born to be slaves, and there were martial races (…). And since in India we have no idea of history we quickly forget our past and always believe what we are told" (MS 10-11). When she says this, she adds that, because of their half-backward origin, they both belong to the servile races.

At the residence Willie meets Percy Cato, a Jamaican born in Panama of mixed parentage, a man "who appeared to have no proper place in the world and could be both Negro and not Negro in his ways" (HL 62), someone who also creates a life story. With Percy, Willie starts going out and getting to know the city of immigrants of the late 1950s: "It was a little world on its own. The immigrants, from the Caribbean, and then the white colonies of Africa, and then Asia, had just arrived" (HL 72). Besides doing other kinds of jobs, Percy is one of the unscrupulous landlords that Selvon mentions in *The Lonely Londoners*: "People don't want to rent to black people. I don't have to tell you that. So one or two of the island governments encouraged people like me to buy properties and rent to West Indians" (HL 76). The mixed ancestry has apparently made Percy indifferent to the ethnic bonds among West Indians in England and he does not identity with them.

In London, away from everything known and painful to him, Willie's mind is "full of thoughts of the hopelessness of home and his own nebulous present. He feels like a nowhere man" (Vishnu 54). Throughout the novel, Willie will always associate home with his personal family history, with the loss of what was once a golden era that cannot be recovered. He carries the visible evidence of caste transgression and sees himself as he imagines others see him, half Brahmin half-backward in a place that is itself half-half, where British colonialism is still a reality, but gradually threatened by the emerging independence movement; home is a place where "the old ways" are still strongly felt, and Willie himself often reacts the way his father and grandfather would, withdrawing into his own melancholy to avoid taking action. Now Willie has to adjust to life in London and, having somehow renounced his family history, he has to create a history of his own, one which will allow him access to opportunities, instead of enclosing him into that limited world he has lived in through his childhood. On his own in a place where he does not know the basic rules – "At the college he had to re-learn everything that he knew" (HL 58) – Willie realizes that, reciprocally, no one knows the old rules that still bound people in India, and he feels free to create a fake image of himself, to enter the world of make-believe he sees around him: "He could, within reason, re-make himself and his past and his ancestry" (HL 60). The "remake" of his mother's family story grants him access to the BBC, where he records his script: "It was like being at the mission school again: he knew what was expected of him" (HL 78). This strategy of impersonation is, according to Jesús Varela Zapata, "related to the multilayered and ambivalent process of mimicry, deeply embedded in the colonized" (16). Being the only possibility of achieving a sense of identity (even if it is fake), it is also a strategy of survival, in a world where location and identification are the main ways of asserting and recognizing identity, and thus visibility. Willie's technique grants him a job at the radio station, writing and recording radio talks, and he meets Roger, a young lawyer "working on the government's legal-aid scheme, representing people who were too poor to pay lawyers' fees" (HL 80) in one of these talks and they become friends. When Roger asks him about his plans for a future job, Willie says he is "marking time"; when

Roger insists on asking about his plans, Willie reacts in a way that strongly resembles his father's story: "He said, 'I want to write.' It wasn't true. The idea hadn't occurred to him until that moment, and it had occurred to him because Roger, embarrassing him, had made him think fast" (HL 82). Thus, by chance, Willie starts writing, using the technique he had developed at the mission school, borrowing elements from films he had seen and mixing them with surroundings and sceneries from back home. Roger launches Willie as a writer: "I'll present you as a literary star to be" (HL 89). He writes intensively until the writing "began to lead him to difficult things, things he couldn't face, and he stopped." (HL 102). He writes twenty-six short stories and his book is approved to be published by an editor that Roger knows. That is the end of Willie's career as a writer. According to Gillian Dooley, unlike V. S. Naipaul, Willie fails in his writing career for lack of motivation; "He is what Naipaul might have become if he had not become a writer (…) This sense of the terrible fate that might have been feeds into the desolation of this novel" (Dooley 2003, 8). All attempts to find a path that might lead him away from his migrant trajectory fail and increase his sense of inadequacy.

His sister Sarojini writes Willie and visits him – she is living in Berlin, married to a German older man who makes documentaries about revolutions, and she is not the vulnerable little girl that he remembered any longer; instead, she is the one who insists that Willie do something with his life before he becomes an idler like their father. Willie resents being pressured by her: "She becomes the complete married woman, as though that woman was there all along. She has become just like my mother. I feel as if all my worry and love has been mocked. I am not sure I like this Sarojini" (HL 115). However, he admits he does not know what he is going to do: he cannot write any more; he does not want to return home for it would mean marrying someone like Sarojini and fight the caste battles his uncle has fought; finishing the degree at college will only provide him with a teaching job in an immigrant neighbourhood like Notting Hill (where he has recently witnessed the race riots). He also sees this option as hiding away. But what definitely makes him decide to leave London are his shameful sexual experiences, which make him feel humiliated and unfit: "When my father told me his life story and talked about his sexual incompetence I mocked him (…). Now I

discover I am like my poor father (…). But in our culture there is no seduction. Our marriages are arranged. There is no art of sex" (HL 118). He feels that, once again, his origins and the culture in which he grew up have not prepared him for the world outside.

Still, as a reflection of his cultural background, he awaits for something good to happen to him: "All that he had now was an idea – and it was like a belief in magic – that one day something would happen, an illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a set of events to the place he should go" (HL 121-122). This passivity is a characteristic Willie shares with his father and which keeps him from taking responsibility for his decisions. It is at this point that Willie receives a letter from an admirer of his book, saying that she shared the thoughts and feelings conveyed by his stories. She is from an African country, of mixed African background, temporarily in London. When they meet, Willie feels he has found a new type of person: "for the first time in his life he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely" (HL 125), beyond his mixed inheritance, which prevented him from being himself at home; beyond the feeling of being different in London, which made him feel that he had to defend himself. Having finished his degree, and with no other prospect, Willie asks Ana to go to Africa with her, leaving behind his three years of life in London.

During the trip Willie worries about the loss of his English, the language he had used in his stories and which represented his connection to a world of make-believe, where everything was possible. Even before arriving in Ana´s country – Naipaul never states the name, but indicates it is Mozambique, the former Portuguese colony – Willie is already feeling a barrier that separates him from the world around: "Willie felt that there was another self inside him, in a silent space where all his external life was muffled" (HL 133). He is aware that his coming to Africa has been the result of lack of options and not an exercise of will, and decides to leave within a few days. Approaching Ana's estate in a northern province of the country, the description is of a vast land enclosed by rivers, which seem to be in the way of his escape, and he feels lost, without a sense of direction in an unknown environment: "I don't ever want this view to become familiar. I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying" (HL 135). And yet he

stays for the next eighteen years, unable to follow his heart or commit to a decision. At this point the narrative jumps forward and the reader is taken to the end of his life in Africa, when Willie tells Ana he has decided to leave her: “I’ve given you eighteen years. I can’t give you any more. I can’t live your life any more. I want to live my own” (HL 136). He has reached the limit of his ability to hide from himself, and acknowledges that all those years he has been passively performing the role of Ana’s husband, meeting the people she is acquainted with, living in her house, but not really doing anything – as if he had been living someone else’s life while his own stood still.

The life of Willie in Africa is narrated by him to Sarojini, in Berlin, just as his father had told him his own story years before. The flat tone of the narrative matches Willie’s characteristics of indecisiveness towards life, focused mainly on his own failure and shame. Over the eighteen years spent in Africa, Willie “has lost the tonal range and rhythms of spoken English. His visual world also seems sparse. There are few social details, little physical description, and what there is often seems abstract as it is presented in vague terms that are repeated like symbols with the reality extracted” (King 182). The sections related to Africa and India are vague compared to the narrative set in London, as if these matched different levels of perception – the colonial world seems imbued with a sense of transition and incompleteness.

Willie tries to explain why he followed Ana to a place he knew nothing about: “I depended on her for my idea of being a man (…). So I loved Ana, for the great gift she had brought me, and to an equal degree I believed in her luck. I would have gone anywhere with her” (HL 142). So they begin a life together, with Ana in the position of authority. After ten years of living in Africa, Willie felt very close to Ana: “She had given me my African life; she was my protector; I had no other anchor” (HL 180). Even when he mentions love and affection, he keeps referring to this aspect of their relationship, of him somehow depending on her for everything, losing his autonomy. Theirs is a relationship of mutual interest: Ana is someone he can depend on; Willie supports her authority in her estate with the servants and the overseers, which might be challenged because of her mixed ancestry and her being a woman in a place where men rule. In their category of

exiled people, they share a sense of loss and disorientation which comes from the absence of roots and a sense of belonging; that is why they understand each other and why Willie felt an immediate connection with her. They are both wounded colonial subjects, carrying the scars of what it took to build the empires, and will also experience what it takes to dismantle them.

Willie's report of life in the Portuguese colony is filled of irony and vivid details that resemble Selvon's portrait of his immigrants and Kureishi's account of Muslims in England. Ana's neighbours live isolated in their estates and occasionally these estate owners meet, but do not really socialize. As Ana tells him: "They are the second-rate Portuguese (…) most of them have an African grandparent, like me" (HL 145). It is a colonial society with a rigid hierarchy, where these second-rate Portuguese have a high status, far above the local Africans, and make money from the land and their commercial activities, never really mixing with the local population. The overseers of the estates "were mixed-race people, born in the country most of them (…). Only the concrete of their houses separated the overseers from the Africans all around" (HL 146). Gradually Willie understands that the world he now lives in, among colonial estate owners, "was only a half-and-half world (…). They were not fully Portuguese, and that was where their own ambition lay" (HL 160-161). It is an artificial world created by the colonial system and implemented so deep that everyone acknowledges it and conforms to it – as long as power relations remain stable: "That was to change in a couple of years, but at the moment that regulated colonial world seemed rock solid to everybody" (HL 145). Far away from the metropolis, the unspoken rules settled down as a guarantee of imperial order and status: Willie mentions one of these families, the Correias, who got involved in illegal international business with a Portuguese and were used as front men by that businessman when things went wrong: "To destroy a Portuguese like himself would have been to break caste, according to the code of the colony, and to become disreputable. There was no trouble at all in throwing a man of the second rank into the darkness, someone from the half-and-half world" (HL 174). Willie sees this social hierarchy as not very different from the Indian caste system, with the same unbendable categories.

In this new country Willie, a foreigner, neither black nor white, feels free from his racial origins: “they accepted the new person I had become in Ana’s country” (HL 148). The place where Willie experiences a sense of freedom resembles in many ways his home and the effects of colonialism are visible everywhere: “those two different worlds side by side: the big estates and the concrete buildings, and the African world that seemed less consequential but was everywhere, like a kind of sea” (HL 152). Unlike home, however, Willie is now on the side of those who are in charge. As he unfolds his story, one gets the feeling that all those people somehow sensed that the imperial days were coming to an end, but did not acknowledge it, not even to themselves. As Willie had felt in London, this too was a world of make-believe, of keeping things as they were for as long as possible, and expected to last a little longer: “Though I don’t think anyone could have guessed that the world of concrete was going to be so completely overwhelmed by the frail old world of straw” (HL 165).

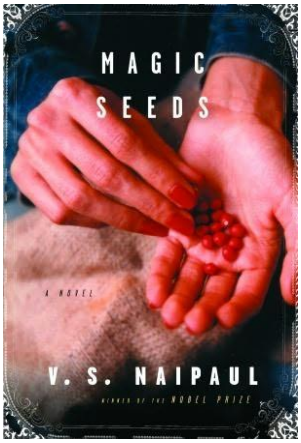
After the first ten years of his routine life with Ana, without much emphasis on the sexual aspect, Willie discovers a whole new dimension related to his sexuality through anonymous encounters with young African prostitutes. “I began to live with a new idea of sex, a new idea of my capacity. It was like being given a new idea of myself” (HL 189). As always, however, this liberation does not last and Willie soon gets tired of this form of escapism: “Now the sensation was of exhaustion and waste (HL 195). Later, he meets Graça, the wife of a new manager in an estate nearby, and they embark on a relationship in which Graça seems to have the same needs as Willie, and this is new to him. He experiences a new kind of fulfillment and thinks “how terrible it would have been if (…) I had died without knowing this depth of satisfaction, this other person that I had just discovered within myself” (HL 205). This is a recurrent motif in Willie: when he experiences something that is able to stir him and actually make him feel deeply, he expresses it as a new identity within himself, unable to combine in one single narrative of identity such multiple directions and contradictory feelings about himself. Despite his strong involvement with Graça, to the point of admitting it to Ana and ending their marriage (although they kept living together), they end their

relationship, and soon after Willie sees her in a different way: “I was making love to a deranged woman. Can it be true, what I felt I had with her?” (HL 226). His inability to relate to women does not reside in his sexual performance, but in his inability to commit.

At this point, a guerrilla war has started, death and destruction are near, the colonial world is falling apart. Willie can no longer pretend he has a place there next to Ana: “I didn’t think I could live through another war” (HL 226). At the hospital where he has been taken due to a fall he acknowledges the sense of incompleteness he is experiencing: “the physical pain of my damaged body was like the other pain that had been with me for months, and perhaps for years” (HL 227). This is the pain resulting from the awareness that he has been hiding all along, avoiding confrontation with his ancestry, his childhood, his youth, his memories, but also his future. When Willie meets his sister again in West Berlin, just six weeks after he has decided to leave Ana and her Africa, he finds a changed Sarojini, attractive, wearing western clothes, with an authoritative manner, a woman who knows her place in the world. “All of this was buried in the girl I had left behind at home. None of this would have come out if the German hadn’t come and taken her away. If he hadn’t come, would she and all her soul have just rotted to nothing?” (HL 138). As he has always done, Willie associates home with stagnation and sterility, an environment where he feels he would be unable to develop and assert his identity. At the age of forty-one, he still does not know who he is: “I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing” (HL 138). About the title, Gillian Dooley writes: “Literally, the book takes Willie’s life to a notional midpoint of forty-one years, and its main characters are racially or socially mixed – half and half. On a deeper level, it is implied that Willie and his father only live half lives” (Dooley 2006, 130). But the title may also suggest something more positive, implying that Willie still has the rest of his life to make amends and try to reach a sense of identity and self, released from all the pressures of his colonial and Indian past – and the fact that Willie is the protagonist of the following novel, *Magic Seeds*, seems to confirm this idea.

His incapacity to act has led to a meaningless life, with no purpose and no action. In this regard, he resembles his father – and that is somehow the real stigma he inherited from him, this passivity which prevents him from facing problems and looking for a solution. In his own way, Willie has – like the character in one of his stories portraying his father – also led so far a life of sacrifice, giving up all he could have become for fear of not achieving success. The similarities between Willie's path and his father's, between the end of the colonial regime in India and in Portuguese Africa, point to a general collapse: "Willie realizes that his personal failures mirror those of his father's and that these personal failures mirror the failure of colonialism" (Nayak 257). The desolation described at the end, in a place that is changing so rapidly that no one has time to analyze what is happening, matches the desolation of the characters, their inner chaos resulting from the lack of adaptation to the new world order, which is one of hybridity, where old and new collide before there can be a gradual adjustment and a new reality may rise.

Magic Seeds begins with Willie back in West Berlin, still "marking time" (as he once told Roger about his stay in London) at his sister's house. During one of their conversations, Willie is being pressured by Sarojini because of his passivity and justifies himself by saying he has always been someone on the outside, but she does not let him get away with it: "You were on the outside because you wanted to be. You've always preferred to hide. It's the colonial psychosis, the caste psychosis" (MS 6). One might even add the psychosis of incompleteness. There is something missing which he cannot identify but without which he does not seem to feel complete. Looking back at his last days in Africa, living among colonials and sharing their high-standard lifestyle, he recalls their deliberate lack of awareness regarding the eminent end of imperialism: "They had all pretended that the world had been made safe; but deep down they all knew that the war was coming, and that one day the roads would disappear" (MS 14). Like them, he has



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also been hiding in a make-belief dimension, living Ana's life and keeping outside, once again resembling his father's strategy of taking vows of silence. Trying to find ways of dealing with his loss, he follows Sarojini's suggestion and reads Gandhis's autobiography, a book he feels to be about exposing shame, ignorance and incompetence, feelings that both Willie and his father experienced and never acknowledged. The parallels between Gandhi's life and his own inspire him to accept change and recognize that he has been living in falsehood and playing successive roles. He concludes: "I mustn't hide any longer" (MS 15).

And so, through Sarojini's international connections, Willie decides to take action and he joins the revolutionary movement of Kandapalli, according to whom "Revolution was to come from below, from the village, from the people" (MS 18), and whose movement has been liberating large areas in rural India. After more than twenty years, Willie returns to India. For security reasons, the secrecy of the movement requires Willie to meet different people before being taken to the areas where liberation is taking place. One of those people is Joseph, a revolutionary who tells Willie: "Yes, I would love nothing better than to see a revolution sweeping everything away (…). But at the same time I have no faith in the human material we have left, after the centuries of slavery" (MS 42). This should warn Willie about the hiatus there is between the idealistic thoughts of a revolution by the people, and the people who are mostly striving to survive in their misery, particularly in rural India. Joseph is an invalid revolutionary, whose daughter has married an "untouchable"; the smells of Indian food and the misery around him bring back his past, "filling Willie with old taboos and strengthening him in the idea of the unhappiness in the revolutionary's little flat, where a daughter had already been made a kind of sacrifice" (MS 43). When he finally arrives at the camp in the forest, Willie sees that his companions "were city people, people who would have had each man his own reason for dropping out of the workaday world and joining the guerrillas" (MS 50) and he concludes that he has come to the wrong revolution but cannot go back. For the first time, he is "inside" and this time there is no protector (no Ana, no Sarojini, no Roger) behind whom he can hide, so Willie must move forward.

Guerrilla life implies extreme life conditions and Willie accepts this austerity and ascetic routine, although he is too westernized: “it was hard for Willie, too used to socks, to walk in slippers” (MS 57). He is sent away from the training camp for a special job, and is led by one of the revolutionaries to a small town, where they stay in a miserable room with obnoxious smells. In order to be able to cope with the extreme conditions around him which threaten to make him disintegrate, Willie does what he usually does in situations of extreme anxiety: “he had taken to counting the different beds he had slept in since he was born, to keep track of things” (MS 58-59). This idea of counting the beds is repeated later, when he is already working as a courier and returns from his expeditions to a small a village controlled by the movement: “The hut (…) was an important addition to the list he carried in his head of places he had slept in, and was able to count (as was his habit) when he felt he needed to get hold of the thread of his life” (MS 99). On the one hand, this reveals his need to keep a glimpse of the whole of his life, as if he were afraid of forgetting parts of him, and shows how tenuous his sense of identity is; on the other hand, it is revealing that he maintains this inner balance by connecting beds / places, and not people or events, thus stressing his distance from others. Later, after a few years of guerrilla life, always moving from village to village, marching and camping in places that look all the same, Willie “felt his memory slipping, like time now, and with that slipping of memory the point of the mental exercise disappeared. (…) He gave it up; it was like shedding a piece of himself” (MS 107). As time goes by, Willie stops questioning his present situation and comes to accept it as his new reality; his previous “lives” are so distant that it is not possible to mingle them with this new condition.

During the time he spends in that town working hard in a sugar factory, eating very badly and sharing a dirty room, he gets closer to the revolutionary Bhoj Narayan, a man whose ancestors were peasants of a backward caste; his grandfather managed to get a job in a new British-built railway town, where his father had been able to finish school and become an accountant, a “success story” in Willie’s opinion. But Narayan still felt rage for the past: “When in the old days I heard about a landlord being killed, my heart sang. I wanted all the feudal to be killed” (MS 61). Willie feels he can understand him and for the first time he feels

affection and companionship: “It is wonderful and enriching, this feeling of friendship. I have waited forty years for it” (MS 73). It is as if this frugal life, fighting for an uncertain cause which he does not feel as his but which he feels righteous, is leading Willie’s attention away from himself and opening him up to the reality around him. His initial distrust of Narayan, Willie admits, was because he was judging him by the standards of the western world he had incorporated, but which did not apply to the reality of deep India. As he learns more of these people, he begins to control his wish to see the flaws in people.

The leaders of their movement decide that Willie has the right profile to become a courier, someone who “has to look OK everywhere. He must never stand out” (…). Willie says, ‘It’s the one thing I have worked at all my life: not being at home anywhere, but looking at home’.” (MS 74). He recognizes that so far he has acted and hidden his permanent anxiety, connected to the feeling of not fitting which he carries since childhood, and which has created the distance he feels towards people and places. As a courier, Willie is always travelling: “This being on the move pleased him, gave him a feeling of purpose and drama, though he could only intuit the general guerrilla situation” (MS 75). He takes messages, passes on instructions, smuggles arms, but never takes part in the actual fighting and so he feels detached from the violence that surrounds him. When one courier asks if he has ever seen the police headquarters, Willie realizes it had never occurred to him to get to know the “adversary”. “He had lived for too long now with his disconnected landscapes, his disconnected duties, with no true idea of the results of his actions” (MS 85). Somehow, Willie is living someone else’s life, all over again, making his contribution without feeling any connection with the cause, convinced that his companions are all some sort of misadjusted men, and he can only explain their participation in the guerrilla through weakness or failure. He keeps in touch with Sarojini through letters and has tried all possibilities of escaping, but he is too afraid of the consequences of getting caught.

After Narayan (who was caught and arrested for picking up a letter at the post office for Willie), he gets to know the unit commander Ramachandra, a man of an upper caste. These people used to be encircled in their caste superiority and had no contact with the miserable reality of their country; since independence,

populist governments create barriers for them, and most emigrate before becoming poor. Ramachandra and others like him in the movement "were embracing their persecutors" (MS 101). Willie feels that he can understand these men very well, because of his mixed background: "his upper-caste father, placid, inactive, with a strain of asceticism, always expecting things to work out; his more fiery mother, many stages down, wishing to seize the world" (MS 101). Being with them makes Willie realize that the inner divide is still there, and the physical distance he has tried to put between him and that world has not made it go away.

There are constant drawbacks in the progress of the liberation intended by the movement, and the assistance they get form the peasants comes mostly out of fear of their guns, and not because they really support the cause. Naipaul explores the negative effects of a guerrilla war supposedly meant to help and free the peasants and the poor, but which serves mainly the individual needs of those who join the movement because there is something wrong in their lives, and this is the best way to deal with their frustration: "The fields of the liberated areas Willie knew had fallen into ruin: the old landlords and feudals had run away years before from the guerrilla chaos, and no secure new order had been established" (MS 86). The changes they make in the villages as they go along are undone as soon as they are gone: "Roads that had been made by the squad with the help of villagers had disappeared; water tanks that had been cleared of mud had become clogged again" (MS 126). The population is too attached to the old ways and does not have the initiative or the strength to cope with the new order that these revolutionaries are trying to impose on them. As Willie gets more familiarized with the activity of the movement, he concludes: "They all want the old ways to go. But the old ways are part of people's being. If the old ways go people will not know who they are" (MS 117). After centuries of absolute control, people have lost the ability to choose what is best for them, and it will take time for the servitude embedded in them to dissolve and leave room for their individuality and self-consciousness. One peasant who usually supplies them with food and accommodation always gives up his own bed to the "visitors" as a courtesy; he does not do that because he sympathizes with the revolution, but because he is instinctively following old ways. "One day he will not give up his bed to me. He will not think he needs to.

That will be the end of the old world and the end of the revolution" (MS 97). What Willie does not realize yet is that he too is clinging to old ways, allowing the past, his ancestry and his origin to determine his present. He feels that his birth and all his life so far have been determined by accidents: "Perhaps men can live more planned lives where they are more masters of their destiny. Perhaps it is like that in the simplified world outside" (MS 113). His insecurity and passivity prevent him from knowing himself and asserting who he is; and because he has built several images of himself, the way others see him does not help him get in touch with himself.

Willie goes on until the murder of a farmer forces him to face the fact (which he kept silenced in order to be able to live in that milieu) that he is among "absolute maniacs", and he concludes he must escape before he becomes like them, people without a conscience, acting out of contempt. He finds a companion willing to run away with him, Einstein. The only way they can be free of the movement is by surrendering to the police – and this is a complicated process, involving hiding and waiting for the right people, politicians, to carry out the negotiations with the police, and thus claim credit for their surrender – the new system mimics the British colonial system in most bureaucratic ways, and corruption is constantly mentioned as an integral element of the way things are done. Before they embark on this process, Einstein tells Willie: "From now on, just remember this: you have done nothing. Things happened around you. Other people did things. But you did nothing. That is what you must remember for the rest of your life" (MS 143). This is the philosophy of the revolution they were part of, and it somehow sums up what Willie's life has been so far, with things happening around him, but not really doing anything himself, not risking anything, and not taking any responsibility.

When they are finally taken to the police, Willie realizes he is going to be arrested – in his naïveté, he had mistaken surrender with amnesty – and faces this new experience as something that he must accept but has not sought: "he settled into his new life, as he had settled into the many other lives that had claimed him at various times" (MS 148). He is told that he is going to be charged for being an accessory to the murder of three men – on one of their missions there had been

an ambush prepared for them and while the rest of the squad waited in the forest, Ramachandra had faced it and killed three policemen, before he was killed. As they were moving away, Willie had thought: “I didn’t think of the dead policemen. I’ve forgotten myself. (…) My only cause now is to survive, to get out of this” (MS 122). What had been just one more moment of detachment, of witnessing others doing something he considers wrong but being able to push it to the back of his mind, now becomes something that concerns him directly and which he cannot ignore. Willie’s reaction is to consider this accusation unfair: in his perspective he has done nothing, his time in the movement has been filled with boredom and he does not feel guilty about anything, he feels no responsibility. “But the superintendent (…) takes me twenty times more seriously than I took myself. He wouldn’t believe that things merely happened around me” (MS 150). Willie is sentenced to ten years of prison and put together with other revolutionaries. They are given better treatment because they are “political prisoners” – a category established by the British “to deal with Gandhi and Nehru and the other nationalists who broke the law but couldn’t be treated like other criminals” (MS 157) – so that again Naipaul succeeds in portraying ironically how much of the imperial ways has been kept and is being reproduced in independent India.

Despite the better conditions, Willie cannot stand this prolongation of the sterile life he had with the guerrilla, being with his former companions, discussing over and over again the texts of Mao and Lenin, expressing their revolutionary views on the peasants and the proletariat and the revolution for the people. He asks the superintendent to be removed from that group: “I have had eight years of that sort of thing. I want to be with my own thoughts. Please put me among the ordinary criminals” (MS 159). And it is alone, away from the influence of others, that he arrives at a conclusion which he shares with Sarojini by letter: “That war was not yours or mine and it had nothing to do with the village people we said we were fighting for. We talked about their oppression, but we were exploiting them all the time. Our ideas and words were more important than their lives and their ambitions for themselves” (MS 161). Willie gradually acknowledges how void of meaning his effort has been, because it was devoid of conviction. He has borrowed someone’s fight to play another role in his life, instead of fighting his own

war. And the same applies to his sister, who has been making documentaries of revolutions taking place all over the world but has never left her role of observer.

None of the prisoners from the movement has admitted having committed any of the murders, but now they are facing the prospect of being named by one of the other prisoners, and Willie once again turns to Sarojini for help, who is used to support political prisoners. Using the book published by Willie in London, and with the help of the lawyer who had helped him publish the book, Roger, they manage to convey a new image of Willie through the newspapers: "It says here that you were a pioneer of modern Indian writing" (MS 168). This nationalist argument grants Willie a special amnesty and he is allowed to return to London. The first time he left the country thanks to his father's contacts; this time he is leaving it through Sarojini's connections.

Back in London, still at the airport, the sight of the pathetic luggage of the poor immigrants from his motherland makes Willie feel "old stirrings, the beginning of old grief" (MS 169), but he fights it, aware that it was the feeling of superior pity and shame which has driven him to join the guerrillas: "I cannot go there again. I must let that part of me die. I must lose that vanity. (…) I must try now to be only myself. If such a thing is possible" (MS 169-170). He stays at his friend Roger's house, and while they are talking about Willie's life in prison, he compares it to "a string of unreal episodes" (MS 172) which would eventually disconnect him from reality; Roger, on the other hand, has always felt he lived in the real world, without surprises. Willie admits to his friend that all his life has been "a series of surprises" (MS 172), over which he had absolutely no control, the same way his father had no control over his own life. "For me it was a form of drift, because I didn't see what else there was for me to do" (MS 172). This is a thought that is recurrent – he went to London in the first place because there was nothing else his father could do back then since he could not deal with him; he went with Ana to Africa because he did not know what else he could do once his scholarship was over; in Berlin he joined the revolutionaries' fight because he had to do something, but it was not really his decision.

At Roger's house he spends one morning closed in his room and rereads his book and he realizes how much his life of wanderer has changed him: "gradually there came to Willie an idea of the man he had become, an idea of what Africa and then the guerrilla life in the forest an then the prison and then simple age had made of him" (MS 181). Again, it is when he is alone that these "moments of clarity" take place, and this time Willie feels a sudden strength when he realizes that he has after all come a long way in silencing his inner demons. "He had never had an idea (…) what he might be. Now he felt he was being given some idea, elusive, impossible to grasp, yet real" (MS 187). He knows he is not the same person he was before, and this new strength releases him from the ties that made him keeping reviving old feelings of incompleteness and inadequacy. Walking in the places he used to walk thirty years before, he no longer feels the weight of the past that the buildings represent; he has acquired a historical sense of time, and is able to see London as the result of different ages, different times, different people, a place that is changing as the world changes – as he is changing, feeling for the first time free from the weight of his past, free of guilt.

Willie finds a job in London, working for a magazine about modern buildings. He has to take a company course in architecture, and welcomes this opportunity of learning. Like Shahid in *The Black Album*, Willie feels that the mission school and later the teacher-training college did not give him the advantage needed in real life, they "hadn't given him a proper grounding, he had always been defeated afterwards in his casual attempts to extend his range" (MS 219). By learning about British architecture of the twentieth century, Willie feels he is learning how to make sense of the visible world around him, and he recalls Roger saying "People do the best that they can do" (MS 220) – a lesson he feels he has learned too late: "It is terrible and heartbreaking that this way of seeing and understanding has come to me so late. I can't do anything with it now" (MS 220).

Looking around at all the people he comes in contact with, they all seem to have missed something important, and to be living "make-believe" lives: Roger is unhappy in his marriage to Perdita; she has a lover whom she uses to humiliate her husband (the lover has a huge house); Roger has a lover too, a working-class woman who lives among an environment of fatherless children and single mothers

getting by with state subventions in estate council houses; Roger is facing problems because of his involvement in dubious business with a very rich man who keeps a grand house with old-fashioned servants just to impress his visitors – everybody seems to be climbing what Roger calls "the property beanstalk", sometimes up, sometimes down. The country Willie is now (re)discovering is but a pale image of the former metropolis and people seem to have lost ethical values and being reduced to judging and being judged by ownership standards, a society in decline where new forces are emerging that are still undefined. Roger reaches the same conclusion as Willie: "our ideas of doing good to other people, regardless of their need, are out of period, a foolish vanity in a changed world" (MS 264). As Willie writes to Sarojini, he was born at the wrong time, and all that he can now aspire to is an undemanding job and a little flat, where he can let the rest of his life pass – and yet he is aware that "life can never be simplified like that" (MS 272), that "marking time" is not something he can do without somehow being involved by the world around him. "At the end of a long journey, it is the wastefulness of his life that impresses Willie" (Folks 251). He has not completed anything, he has not changed the world; he has rejected his origins, but has not been able to replace that void by any kind of achievement.

Roger's philosophy is that happiness and success are meant for people "who have very precise goals, limited and attainable" (MS 272) – and Willie knows such a person: Marcus, a wealthy West Indian African diplomat, whose life ambition has always been to have a white grandchild, and who has finally achieved his goal (his half-English son married a pure-white aristocratic lady, and one of their children is white). The character first appears in *Half a Life*, and Roger explains to Willie the purpose of Marcus's life dream: "He wants when he is old to walk down King's Road with this white grandchild. People will stare and the child will say, loudly, 'What are they staring at, Grandfather?'" (HL 90). Willie and Roger attend Marcus's son's wedding – a grotesque event, where black and white keep apart amidst a mixture of traditions and origins, from a reading of extracts of Shakespeare's *Othello* (a Moorish general married to the daughter of a Venetian senator) to a Dutch Antillean band: "Naipaul leaves the reader with an impression that half a century after the British Empire began to disintegrate all that remains is

a past and a present comingled as dismal burlesque" (Bradford 202). The decaying aristocratic family of the bride seems not to be sure of how they should behave in this new world where they no longer dictate the rules. As Roger tells Willie, "The world has changed much too quickly for them. Perhaps they don't feel a great deal about anything, and have been confused for the last hundred years" (MS 278). In fact, the whole British society seems to be adrift, waiting for some solution that may bring back a sense of order and purpose beyond the immediate satisfaction of one's needs. Bradford identifies "Thatcher's Britain" in the gloomy portrait of London when Willie returns: "for Willie, the vast majority of its population seem content with the lazy residue of postwar socialism: idleness and state-funded indulgence are the endemic features of a cataleptic society" (202). The characters set in London in *Magic Seeds* seem to lack, all of them, a sense of purpose, and this pervades all social classes, the working-class women, the bankers, the men taking the course on architecture… this is indeed, in the words of Gillian Dooley, a "desolate tale of unfulfilled lives" (2003, 10).

That night, Willie dreams of his past lives at the sound of the music from the wedding band: Africa, with the destruction he witnessed before leaving; India, the endless marching with the revolutionaries in uniform in the forest, and the jail where "as on a slave ship, the prisoners lay side by side on the floor in two rows separated by a central aisle" (MS 280). It seems to him he has taken a lesson from the dream, but in the morning he can only remember this idea: "It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That's where the mischief starts. That's where everything starts unraveling" (MS 280). For Willie, this is something he cannot write about to Sarojini, it sounds too negative to impose on her. He thus fails to see the value of the accurate conclusion he has taken from his traveller's life. In its simplicity, this is where the sense of inadequacy and incompleteness come from – both Willie's and his father's. "In the same way that Willie was unable to use his writing to find his way out of the wilderness of his early years (…) he is now unable to see that this discovery is a worthwhile and important one that could be made the basis of not just a letter to his sister, but a whole writing career" (Dooley 2006, 134). This could have been the way out for Willie's frustration and lack of purpose - after all, he has seen with his own eyes (and has known of Sarojini's activity) the

negative effects of revolution when it is practiced without heart and soul and from the outside, without valid knowledge of the situation, and when intentions, no matter how good they are, do not match the interest of the people involved. He would have a valuable lesson to pass on, if he had not missed it.

Willie can be seen as the anti-hero of the *Bildungsroman*: he fails to achieve maturity in the traditional sense. He does not become a self-made man, and the beds he used to count were not his: “I have never slept in a room of my own. (…) I lived in somebody else’s house always, and slept in somebody else’s bed. (…) Will I ever sleep in a room of my own?” (MS 177-178). As the title of the novel indicates, Willie has been searching for “magic seeds”, a formula that would be ready waiting for him to solve his problems and which he would eventually find in one of his voyages. But the world of the postcolonial era does not have solutions for this new category of enigmas, and the categories and solutions created by imperialism do not apply, so it is up to these subjects – both colonials and colonized – to find ways to cope with the colonial inheritance. According to Jeffrey Folks, Willie is a “modern barbarian”: “The modern barbarians, Naipaul discovers, are those who refuse to look at the world as it is and to reflect on the causes of its inadequacy” (252). Willie eventually realizes that there are no “magic seeds”, only the world outside, as it is / has become, but this is a lesson he learns when he is too old to try again. Similarly to Goethe’s William Meister, Naipaul’s Willie Chandran is left at the verge of a new beginning, but ironically, it is too late for Willie.

CONCLUSION

The journeys of the three protagonists constitute for them, each in its own way, journeys of self-discovery and processes of becoming. In the end of each novel, there is the unstated feeling that belonging is itself a process rather than an end, and can only be achieved through compromise. The individual narratives of Moses, Shahid and William are intertwined both with the lives of those around them and the general culture of social narratives of the places they live in, and the cultural marks of the places they come from remain embedded in them. At the end of each novel, they are aware that there is no “happy ending” to their story, that all they can aspire to is a mutable sense of belonging, as long as they keep trying to achieve a sense of purpose.

The colonial inheritance is a given that cannot be ignored, and they must come to terms with it, overcome the sense of loss and displacement it creates and move on to the next phase of their lives, as individuals born in places that no longer exist as such, trying to find their place in a society that is itself renewing. In this sense, their journeys can be seen to represent the process undergone by the former colonies in their processes of transformation and adaptation to the new status of independence, still as deeply shaped by the colonial legacy as the former colonial powers, which are also adapting to the new world order, where people from different backgrounds mix, interact and constitute new social structures.

The provisional sense of identification that Moses, Shahid and even William seem to share with their peers (with whom they share ethnic and cultural references) decreases their loneliness and allows them to feel part of a group and get strength from that. However, this deceptive sense of belonging also distracts them from their quest. It is when they are on their own that the protagonists question the world around them, the choices people make and the grounds for those choices. That is when they are able to gradually identify what they have to

sacrifice in order to belong to that specific group, namely their globalised perspective, their growing, encompassing identification with different realities.

William is a writer, Shahid aspires to becoming a writer, and it is suggested that Moses is going to write about his life in London: writing seems to be the way to achieve understanding and therefore acceptance of their history, just as it is for the authors who have created these characters, in a well-known trope. By reading their work, one is made aware of the contradictions of our present world, of the immense impact that colonialism has had both on individuals and societies, and of the need to find new perspectives to analyse, categorise and understand the postcolonial world we live in.

The sense of incompleteness that transpires from the protagonists of the novels analised here is human, more than postcolonial, and that seems to be the key to overcome the nostalgia and displacement derived from the end of colonialism. At the end of each novel there is a window open to new directions, which may provide the protagonists the sense of identity they seek, in their process of becoming. Born in a former colony myself, the choice of the topics and themes discussed here are strongly connected to personal issues of identification and belonging. In this sense, this journey has also been one of personal transformation, one guided by the perspectives of both the authors and the characters, as well as by the theoretical texts consulted. Literature, in this case, fictional literature, remains the faithful depository of our longings, questions and quests.

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